HER MAJESTY’S GOVERNMENT

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28 October 2019
House of Commons

Monday 28 October 2019

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

PRA YERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

HOME DEPARTMENT

The Secretary of State was asked—

Leaving the EU: Unaccompanied Child Refugees in Europe

1. **Jeff Smith** (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): If she will make it her policy to maintain the rights of unaccompanied child refugees in Europe to family reunion in the UK in the event that the UK leaves the EU without a deal. [900158]

10. **Mr Virendra Sharma** (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): If she will make it her policy to maintain the rights of unaccompanied child refugees in Europe to family reunion in the UK in the event that the UK leaves the EU without a deal. [900167]

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): The UK has a long and proud tradition of offering protection to vulnerable people fleeing war and persecution, and the Government take the welfare of vulnerable children seriously. We support the principle of family unity wholeheartedly, and the Government are committed to meeting our obligation under section 17 of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018 to seek to negotiate an agreement with the EU on family reunion for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

**Jeff Smith:** The House of Lords Home Affairs Committee recommendation is to temporarily maintain the current rights for family reunion in the event of a no-deal exit to avoid legal limbo. Will the Home Secretary assure this House that the Government will do that to protect vulnerable families in the event of a no deal?

**Priti Patel:** I would like to reiterate that the Government are committed to getting a deal and, with that, fulfilling our section 17 obligation to move forward in the right way. As I have already made clear, we are committed to ensuring that we protect those who are vulnerable and, importantly, that we continue to have high standards when it comes to unaccompanied asylum-seeking children.

**Mr Virendra Sharma:** I hope it is in order for me to wish everybody happy Diwali. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear.”]

At least one third of all unaccompanied asylum-seeking children in England are cared for in London, but London Councils has identified a £32 million funding shortfall. Will the Government commit to fully funding those unsustainable care costs and to reforming the national transfer scheme, so that local authorities can continue to provide the high-quality care and support that vulnerable children need?

**Priti Patel:** I, too, would like to wish a very happy Diwali to all Hindus across the United Kingdom, and to the hon. Gentleman and others.

The hon. Gentleman recognises and highlights the fact that London authorities do indeed deal with a significant number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children. I would like him to know that I have had representations directly from London Councils and London authorities. We are looking, as we always do, at the number of unaccompanied asylum-seeking children who come through the system, but also at the pressures that that puts on local authority budgets.
Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I am sure the whole House welcomes the generous approach of the Government to child refugees in Europe. Will the Government apply the same generosity to child refugees who are British citizens in Syria?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend highlights a current and pressing issue: child refugees in Syria. I know that other colleagues in the House, including the Foreign Secretary, have spoken about this issue recently. We review on a case-by-case basis. I should just say for the benefit of the House that every case has to be looked at individually. They are difficult cases and we have to look at all the backgrounds behind all the children.

David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that whatever course of action we take, we must do everything possible to discourage people from sending vulnerable young children on unaccompanied journeys through Africa, Asia and Europe?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. All hon. Members will recognise that we see far too much tragedy in relation to children fleeing war-torn parts of the world. We need to do more in-country and we have to work upstream with our international partners.

Carol Monaghan (Glasgow North West) (SNP): My constituent Helen Tekete fled Ethiopia in 2015 and came to the UK. In the process, she was separated from her two children. Thankfully, her 11-year-old son was able to join her two years ago, but her 13-year-old daughter’s application has twice been refused. Will the Home Secretary meet me to discuss the case?

Priti Patel: I will of course meet the hon. Lady. As she will recognise, everything is looked at from casework on a case-by-case basis, but I will be more than happy to discuss that case with her.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): The Government have stated that they will seek to negotiate a future agreement with the EU on plans for family reunion, but that refers to separated children only. The Home Office’s own statistics show that in 2018 over 1,000 adults and children were reunited with their family members in the UK under the Dublin regulations, but the majority of those would not be covered by the Government’s commitment. What preparations, if any, have been made by the Government to ensure that safe and legal routes for refugee family reunion continue to operate to the same standards and provisions as under the EU law?

Priti Patel: As the hon. Gentleman will know, the Government are very clear that when we leave the EU we will leave the Dublin III regulation, but we will continue to participate during the transition period if we have a deal. The fact of the matter is that discussions are under way across Government. It is important for the House to recognise that this is not just from the Home Office’s perspective, but that it is part of our ongoing negotiations with the European Union, which are, of course, led by the Department for Exiting the European Union.

The Minister for Crime, Policing and the Fire Service (Kit Malthouse): The Prime Minister has made it one of his chief priorities to strengthen police numbers over the next three years by 20,000, starting with 6,000 by the end of March 2021.

Jessica Morden: Gwent police’s budget has been cut by 40% in real terms since 2010, so the Government’s plans to recruit will only take us back to where we were in 2010, if that. What assurances have Ministers given Gwent police that this programme and, importantly, pension costs will be funded after the first year?

Kit Malthouse: I am happy to say that Gwent police are already up 42 police officers on last year’s budget settlement. A target of a further 62 has been allocated in the latest funding round. Announcements about police funding will be made as usual in early December, and I am confident that there will be smiles all round at Gwent police when we do that.

Carol Monaghan: What recent assessment her Department has made of the adequacy of the number of police officers in England and Wales.

The Minister for Crime, Policing and the Fire Service: I will of course meet the hon. Lady. As my right hon. Friend will be aware, there has already been an initial allocation of police officers to his county force and there will be more news to come. We are in conversation with the policing community more widely about the allocation of police officers for years 2 and 3 of the uplift programme. Once that is concluded, I will let him know.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): At my weekend surgery, a constituent who had phoned the police time after time about neighbours from hell living above him said that he realised, at one moment of desperation, that he had a hammer in his hand. Had he used that hammer against those neighbours from hell, the police would have turned up—no doubt very quickly—and he would have been the object of their attention, not the neighbours from hell. When I meet the Minister tomorrow to discuss extra police for Birkenhead, will he give a commitment not only in terms of numbers but that the police should stand on the side of decent citizens, not on the side of neighbours from hell?

Kit Malthouse: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right about the police standing on the side of decent citizens. When I hear distress calls from across the
country about people who are not getting the response that they require from the police. I refer everybody to the police and crime commissioner for that area, who is responsible for performance and priority in the police force in question. Happily, the right hon. Gentleman will know that 200 police officers have been allocated from the uplift to Merseyside police, as a target for it to recruit over the next 12 months or so, and there will be more to come when we settle years 2 and 3. Like him, I want to see more police officers patrolling in Birkenhead, particularly in Hamilton Square, which holds fond memories for me as a child.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Police officers are on the frontline of defeating terrorism. The Minister will join me and all others here in welcoming the news of the demise of Baghdadi, the leader of the evil, vile and barbaric organisation Daesh. My question to the Minister is this: military action alone will not defeat Daesh—indeed, in 2015, I led the campaign to get the news of the demise of Baghdadi, the leader of that evil, vile and barbaric organisation Daesh. My question to the Minister is this: military action alone will not defeat Daesh—in 2015, I led the campaign to get the appeal, which sucked in vulnerable individuals from around the world and here in the UK?

Kit Malthouse: I well remember my hon. Friend’s persistent questioning from the Back Benches of former Prime Ministers to get the terminology right about this mission. He is quite right that we all need to work together on a multi-stranded approach to prevent young people from being seduced into these evil ideologies and practices across the world, and the police are at the forefront of that. I hope and believe that some of the measures put in place to bind the police as closely as possible into society will assist in that mission.

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): In July on the steps of Downing Street, and again in his heavily criticised speech in front of new police recruits in West Yorkshire, the Prime Minister promised 20,000 new police officers for the frontline, but a leaked Home Office letter suggests that as many as 7,000 of these will not be going to local forces. With the Budget now scapped, it is anyone’s guess if and how these officers will be recruited, so will the Minister tell us: will every one of those 20,000 officers be going to the frontline, as promised by the Prime Minister—yes or no?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady makes a good point about the allocation of police officers across the piece of policing, and I know that every single warranted police officer regards themselves as being on the frontline, whatever job they do. She will know that we have allocated the first 6,000 police officers to territorial policing, but there is a conversation to be had about further allocations, specifically to serious and organised crime, through the National Crime Agency, and to counter-terrorism policing, and about the balance between those and the territorial forces. I would not regard any one of those functions as non-frontline.

County Lines Drugs Gangs

3. Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What steps she is taking to tackle county lines drugs gangs.

7. David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): What steps she is taking to tackle county lines drugs gangs.

18. Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): What steps she is taking to tackle county lines drugs gangs.

23. David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): What steps she is taking to tackle county lines drugs gangs.

The Minister for Crime, Policing and the Fire Service (Kit Malthouse): We are determined to end county lines and have announced a £20 million package of initial measures to do so. This will expand the national county lines co-ordination centre, help to target the transport network and go after the profits from this crime, and support young people to exit county lines.

Andrew Jones: North Yorkshire police have had recent success arresting six people in a county lines operation in Harrogate. Breaking the gangs that operate the county lines is obviously critical, but so is supporting the addicts, who are at the end of the line, and those exploited into dealing. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is through tackling both supply and demand that progress will be made in dealing with county lines?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I gather that he was recently involved with his local constabulary in the apprehension of a drug dealer on East Parade in Harrogate—I am glad to see he is on the frontline too. He is right that we need a balanced approach to tackling the harm that drugs cause in our society. While that includes enforcement and disrupting the business model of those involved in promulgating this awful trade, we also have to provide support to young people to get them out of the habit, or even to prevent them from getting into the trade in the first place. Significant resources are being devoted to this, not least through the early intervention youth fund, which is putting hundreds of millions of pounds behind these kinds of projects.

David Duguid: The Home Office has a number of UK-wide initiatives to combat the range of problem drug use factors, including county lines—we might even refer to it as country lines, because it affects the whole United Kingdom, and there are people suffering from drug gangs coming as far into the north-east as Banff and Buchan. With the SNP’s stated policy of decriminalising possession and consumption of controlled drugs, what effect does the Minister think that such a differentiation in Scotland would have on these UK-wide efforts?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend was present at the Scottish Affairs Committee when we discussed this matter in some detail, so he will know that my view is that having a different regime in Scotland from that in England and Wales could cause significant problems for Scotland, not least because it would become a target for those wishing to promote the trade more easily and running county lines from England into Scotland. There are times when we are four nations and times when we are one country, and on drugs we should be one.
Henry Smith: Sussex police were recently in receipt of a Home Office grant to tackle county lines drug offences. Will my hon. Friend update the House please?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend is a doughty defender of Sussex police and a great supporter, I know, of the brilliant police and crime commissioner there, Katy Bourne, who is doing a fantastic job. He is right that Sussex police have been in the forefront of the fight against county lines and have received significant funding of £900,000 through the early intervention youth fund and £1.3 million to support police operations in the area. I am happy to say that in the latest week of intensification of action against county lines, which I hope he noted the other week, Sussex police made 29 arrests and safeguarded 50 vulnerable individuals.

David Morris: I am deeply concerned about the county lines gangs from Bradford and Liverpool which are bringing drugs into my constituency. How does my hon. Friend expect the £20 million funding package that has been announced to stop those gangs, and to support victims in Morecambe and Lunesdale?

Kit Malthouse: I too am concerned about the situation in Morecambe, not least because, like Birkenhead, it has happy memories for me of my childhood. I am keen to sit down and talk to my hon. Friend about what more we can do in Morecambe, not least because we are in conversation with Merseyside police about the action that we want to take on county lines. Obviously, many of the lines into Morecambe will be run from my home town. It is a town in a particular position, because there are limited points of access, over bridges and by road, which gives the police a significant opportunity to identify and apprehend criminals before they even get there.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): Our July Select Committee report warned that county lines were spreading violence and drug networks into not just cities but towns. In Castleford, in my constituency, where I called a meeting with the police, local schools and community representatives, there is a real sense that the problem is getting worse in our towns, with residents reporting overt drug dealing on the streets and in town centres. People are concerned not just about the halving of our neighbourhood police, but about the fact that the youth endowment fund that the Minister has announced is tiny by comparison with the cuts in the youth service. Does he accept that there is a real perception across the country that the Government’s cuts in the youth service as well, they will not even get there.

Kit Malthouse: I hope that the hon. Gentleman has noticed some of the recent successes that we have had in dealing with some of the really big gangs who promulgate this trade—not least the National Crime Agency’s biggest ever seizure of drugs, which were being shipped in, funnily enough, in Liverpool, in fruit and veg lorries. Nevertheless, there is always much more to do. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be encouraged by the fact that the Home Secretary and I, along with the Minister for Security, my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), who is responsible for dealing with serious and organised crime, are working closely together to see what more we can do in order to do exactly as the hon. Gentleman says, and take this business out from front to back.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): We have heard twice about the Minister’s early days as a youth, including in Liverpool, but the fact is that he will have to grow up fast, because the wicked people behind drugs in this country are big gangsters, and those who killed the 39 innocent people in that refrigerated van are big players. When will the Government tackle the wicked men and women who run crime in this country, and do it effectively?

Kit Malthouse: I hope that the hon. Gentleman has noted some of the recent successes that we have had in dealing with some of the really big gangs who promulgate this trade—not least the National Crime Agency’s biggest ever seizure of drugs, which were being shipped in, funnily enough, in Liverpool, in fruit and veg lorries. Nevertheless, there is always much more to do. I hope that the hon. Gentleman will be encouraged by the fact that the Home Secretary and I, along with the Minister for Security, my right hon. Friend the Member for Great Yarmouth (Brandon Lewis), who is responsible for dealing with serious and organised crime, are working closely together to see what more we can do in order to do exactly as the hon. Gentleman says, and take this business out from front to back.

Caroline Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): County lines operations have invaded every town and city across the UK, and they do not discriminate when it comes to the lives they affect. South Wales police, my own excellent constabulary, are seeing children as young as 13 arrested for involvement in county lines. We must protect the young and vulnerable from this exploitation, and no matter what the Government think they are doing, it is not enough. We need to do more to protect young people from this dreadful county lines epidemic.

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady is exactly right. Thankfully, her local police force will have more police officers next year to help with this effort, and I know that one of the key focuses of all the police forces involved in dealing with this awful phenomenon is the safeguarding of young people. Obviously, I will be working closely with colleagues from the Department of Health and Social Care and
the Department for Education to see what more preventive work we can do. I believe that there is quite a lot more we can do around the disruption of the business model, to make it more difficult for people to deal drugs and to launder the money involved in the trade. That would make them less likely to promote it in smaller towns and villages and more likely to concentrate instead on urban areas, where we can get to work on the issue.

**Domestic Abuse Commissioner**

4. **Preet Kaur Gill** (Birmingham, Edgbaston) (Lab/Co-op): What assessment has she made of the potential merits of making the role of domestic abuse commissioner a full-time position. [900161]

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins):** We were delighted to announce Nicole Jacobs as our designate domestic abuse commissioner. The role was advertised as part time because we understood from advice from recruitment advisers that that would ensure the widest range of candidates. However, we have said in our response to the Joint Committee on the Draft Domestic Abuse Bill, and in the House on Second Reading, that we have an open mind on whether the role requires a full-time position. The Bill Committee will start its deliberations tomorrow, and no doubt we will look into that question in detail.

**Preet Kaur Gill:** I welcome the appointment of Nicole Jacobs to the role of championing the needs of survivors of domestic abuse. As a social worker, I know that children are at serious risk of long-term physical and mental health problems as a result of witnessing domestic violence, so what steps is the Minister taking to ensure that the commissioner is given the necessary powers and resources to properly support the one in seven children and young people under the age of 18 who have lived with domestic abuse at some point?

**Victoria Atkins:** I am extremely grateful to the hon. Lady for raising this matter. We know that domestic abuse is one of the primary adverse childhood experiences that can have such a terrible knock-on effect on a young person’s future life as well as on their own relationships. That is one of the many reasons why we are giving the commissioner powers to require information from public authorities and to oblige public authorities and central Government to respond to her recommendations within 56 days of her making them.

**Diana Johnson** (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I like the Minister a great deal, but what she has just said about being advised by the recruitment agency that she would get the widest range of candidates only if the position were part time is hogwash. We know that abusers and those who exercise coercive control do not do that on a part-time basis. This needs to be a full-time position, and I hope that when this is discussed in Committee, the Minister will see sense and the position will become full time.

**Victoria Atkins:** I thank the hon. Lady; the feeling is mutual, and I look forward to working with her on the Bill Committee. The decision was made in the best of faith, and the joy of appointing the designate commissioner ahead of the House’s scrutiny of the Bill is that these issues can be teased out. As I say, we are approaching this with an open mind, and we will see what the evidence says.

**EU Settlement Scheme**

5. **Jamie Stone** (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): What recent assessment she has made of the accessibility of the EU settlement scheme application process. [900162]

11. **Alex Chalk** (Cheltenham) (Con): What support she is providing to EU citizens applying to the EU settlement scheme. [900168]

**The Minister for Security (Brandon Lewis):** The EU settlement scheme is designed to be simple and straightforward for people to apply to. The Government are also putting in grant support for a wide range of voluntary and community organisations, as well as digital and telephone support through the resolution centre.

**Jamie Stone:** As a remainer, I wish that the EU citizens in my constituency had not been put in this position. As the Minister has mentioned, applications can be made by phone or iPad, but connectivity in parts of my constituency is absolute mince, to use a Scottish expression. I have raised this time and again—we would be better off with two cans and a length of string. Cannot the Government see that this lack of connectivity militates against the EU citizens who want to remain in my constituency?

**Brandon Lewis:** People do not have to do things digitally. They can speak to people or they can send things in. We also have several hundred centres that people can go to. Perhaps the hon. Gentleman could join us in encouraging the Scottish National party to support the Prime Minister’s work to see broadband rolled out more widely across the country, so that Scotland can benefit just as the rest of the UK can.

**Alex Chalk:** I am delighted that the settlement scheme is progressing at pace, with 2 million or so people signing up. However, some individuals in my constituency really benefit from face-to-face contact, so what steps are being taken, through pop-up shops or whatever, to ensure that they can get the vital hands-on support they need?

**Mr Speaker:** Stone followed by Chalk seems apposite.

**Brandon Lewis:** The Home Office is undertaking a programme of work through voluntary organisations, and the £3.75 million scheme includes working with people at pop-up events. I visited one in Great Yarmouth that is doing excellent work with communities so that people can see how simple the system is and are able to apply, and we encourage more people to do so. We have now reached 2.2 million applications, and I look forward to that number growing quickly.

**Mr Speaker:** From Stone to Chalk to Cherry—I call Joanna Cherry.
Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker.

Introducing digital-only proof of status will cause many problems for EU citizens, and low digital users in particular. The Home Office’s own assessment of creating a digital-only “prove your right to work” service said that there was “very strong evidence that this would cause low digital users a lot of issues”.

so does the Minister agree that the same will apply to the EU settlement scheme? Will he reconsider the provision of physical documents?

Brandon Lewis: People applying through the settlement scheme obviously get an email confirming that the application has been processed and dealt with. The process is being done digitally as we are moving to a digital system more generally. It is the right way, it works for employers, and the fact that 2.2 million people have already applied through the scheme in just a few months confirms that.

Joanna Cherry: In Scotland, the Scottish Government have taken a number of steps to reassure EU citizens, and the First Minister has launched a “Stay in Scotland” campaign, which provides practical advice and support to EU citizens during this uncertain time. The Scottish Government have also announced funding for a new programme in Scotland called Settled, which is designed to target vulnerable EU citizens and offer them help with applications to the scheme. Does the Minister welcome that initiative by the Scottish Government? Will he be doing anything similar in England?

Brandon Lewis: The hon. and learned Lady should not be using that kind of language. There is no reason for anybody to have any concerns or be unsettled. We have been clear that we want EU citizens to stay, and that is why we introduced a scheme to ensure that we protect their rights and put £9 million into work with voluntary groups in addition to the £3.75 million to ensure that we get the message out. I am happy to work with anybody who wants to ensure that we are spreading the message positively and properly. Some 2.2 million people have already applied through the scheme, and I look forward to seeing all 3.5 million people processed as quickly as possible.

Stephen Crabb (Preseli Pembrokeshire) (Con): The money that the Minister has made available for voluntary groups is welcome, but does he recognise the specific concern around hard-to-reach groups, such as elderly people in care homes and people working in rural areas, in agriculture and in construction? Does he agree that there is a need for real outreach to ensure that all EU citizens have a chance to clarify their position in law?

Brandon Lewis: My right hon. Friend makes a good point. We are working with voluntary groups and through the EU settlement resolution centre to ensure that we reach all those vulnerable and harder-to-reach groups, particularly in rural areas. For example, we are working with local communities by holding pop-up events, such as the one that I saw in my constituency, to reach out to as many as possible. People have until December 2020 to apply to the scheme, and it would be good to get 3.5 million through as quickly as possible.

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): The Minister will be aware of the genuine concern among EU nationals, their families and their employers about the workings of the EU settlement scheme. He will also be aware, as will Members on both sides of the House, about the general problems with delays at the Home Office. For instance, the proportion of leave to remain applications taking more than six months doubled between 2014 and 2017. The Minister correctly said that more than 2 million applications to the EU settlement scheme have now been made, but 18% of them have not been resolved. The Minister caused concern recently when he said that EU nationals who fail to apply before 2020 could be deported. Will he give the House an assurance that every effort will be made to reach out to those who have yet to apply and that applications will be processed promptly?

Brandon Lewis: The short answer is yes. Just to give a bit of flavour to that, there are no delays with the EU settlement scheme; the right hon. Lady conflated two completely different schemes in her question. People’s status under the EU settlement scheme is decided very quickly, and 2.2 million people have now applied through that process. In the whole of the process, only two people out of the set of figures that she gave have been refused, on grounds of criminality, which is absolutely right.

Marriage: 16 and 17-year-olds

6. Sarah Champion (Rotherham) (Lab): If she will bring forward legislative proposals to end marriages involving 16 and 17-year-olds.

[900163]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): We have listened carefully to the debate on the legal age of marriage and continue to keep it under review. Tackling forced marriage is one of this Government’s priorities, and I am proud that we made it an offence in 2014.

Sarah Champion: The Minister is aware that 350 children a year are married in this country. We do not know how many of those are forced marriages, nor do we know how many unregistered or overseas marriages there are. The Minister can change this instantly, and change the culture around it, by making the legal age of marriage 18. Will she do it?

Victoria Atkins: I thank the hon. Lady for her question, knowing as I do the work that she is doing on this. We are very much looking at the evidence. In 2016, the last year for which we have figures, 179 people aged 16 to 17 entered marriage, out of nearly half a million who got married that year. In a way, the hon. Lady’s question demonstrates the complexities of this difficult subject, but I am very keen to work with her and other Members to look at the evidence on this important issue.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Does the Minister really believe that it is still appropriate for children to marry, with parental consent, before they have completed mandatory education or training up to the age of 18?
Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend has rather demonstrated the paradox in age legislation in our country. I take some comfort from the fact that marriages under the age of 18 are on the decline in this country. We know that that is sadly not the case elsewhere in the world, but I am happy to work with her and other Members from across the House on this difficult and thorny but important topic.

Place-based Crime Prevention

9. Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): What assessment has been made of the effectiveness of place-based crime prevention strategies.

The Minister for Crime, Policing and the Fire Service (Kit Malthouse): There is strong evidence that place-based approaches can be an effective means of preventing a wide range of crimes, including acquisitive offences such as burglary and theft. That is why, on 1 October, my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary announced the £25 million safer streets fund, which will support the communities worst affected by such crimes to implement effective situational prevention, such as street lighting and home security.

Melanie Onn: Old Market Place and Rutland Street in Great Grimsby have both experienced incredibly violent knife crime, including the on-street killing of a homeless man. Will Operation Galaxy, launched by Humberside police today, look at what changes need to be made to the built environment so that my constituents can feel safe again? Can the Minister also say how much money Humberside police will be getting out of the £25 million announced?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady is quite right that, as I said in my previous answer, small design changes or equipment such as CCTV can have a huge impact on crime. We know, for example, that alley gating can result in a 43% reduction in burglary—I was sorry to read that she was burgled earlier this year. We will encourage applications to the fund from the areas that are most significantly affected, particularly by acquisitive crime, on the basis that the worst affected 5% of areas account for 23% of all offences. I look forward to entertaining a bid from Humberside police.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Ind): The Minister will be aware that there is a plethora of evidence that we can design out crime, both in the built environment and through the design of objects. The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care recently launched the national academy for social prescribing, to link healthcare with the arts and creative industries. Can the Minister update us on the work that the Home Office is doing with our world-beating creative and arts industries to help to combat crime?

Kit Malthouse: In typical fashion, the right hon. Gentleman poses an intriguing challenge, which I shall have to research in the Department to find out whether there has been any impact. However, one area that I know we could do more work with, and that is a significant contributor to the cultural life of the nation, is the architectural profession, which often does not make crime prevention a top requirement when putting in place developments, but very often should.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): One of the greatest casualties of a decade of cuts to policing has been seen in the breakdown in partnerships between local authorities and mental health trusts. So what discussions is the Minister having with those departments to ensure that there is investment in those services and shared funding to move them forward?

Kit Malthouse: The hon. Lady is right that the rise in the incidence of mental ill health has caused significant problems across the country, not least to the police. The frontline response teams I have met in the past few months in this job have all highlighted to me the problems they have in dealing with mental health cases. However, the problem has been sorted in some parts of the country, not least in my county of Hampshire, where there is a good relationship between the organisations, such that they are functioning well. I would like to take that best practice and spread it.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): The Minister mentioned being able to design out crime. What more can be done by linking up with local councils to ensure that not only buildings but the landscaping around them are designed to try to minimise crime and make places more pleasant to visit?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend raises an extremely good point. A well functioning local criminal justice partnership, which will involve the local authority as well as the police and other bodies involved in crime fighting, will often look at exactly these kinds of issues. I hope that as we move forward in the police uplift programme one area of focus will be a regional approach to problem solving in policing. I would be more than happy to meet her to discuss this if she has any specific ideas.

Firefighter Numbers

12. Vicky Foxcroft (Lewisham, Deptford) (Lab): What recent assessment she has made of the adequacy of the number of firefighters.

The Minister for Crime, Policing and the Fire Service (Kit Malthouse): We are confident that fire and rescue services have the resources they need to do their important work. Operational decisions are for each fire and rescue authority to make as part of the integrated risk management planning process, and it is for individual fire and rescue services to make decisions on the number of firefighters they employ.

Vicky Foxcroft: Since Grenfell, London Fire Brigade has undertaken focused and enhanced visits to high-rise buildings, using both station-based crews and fire safety inspecting officers. Inspecting officers are highly skilled individuals who ensure that those with responsibility for buildings are taking the necessary steps to uphold fire safety standards. What is the Minister doing to support brigades in recruiting and retaining officers in these essential specialist roles?

Kit Malthouse: Obviously the Grenfell inquiry is due to publish shortly, and we will all have to learn lessons from its conclusions. I am happy to meet her and other Members from across the House on this difficult and thorny but important topic.
number of fires attended to, in particular, and incidents across the board more generally. We have secured an extremely good financial settlement for the fire service across the country this year, and I have urged fire chiefs, not least in the light of the first set of inspections for some time, to invest in prevention.

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): I certainly support the Government in recruiting an extra 20,000 police officers, but may I ask the Minister to look again at the resources for the fire service? In West Yorkshire, and I suspect in other parts of the country, they are extremely stretched at the moment. The number of people on a fire engine is going down to try to mask over those stretched resources. Will he look at that again, because the fire service needs extra resources, just as the police do?

**Kit Malthouse**: I would expect nothing less than a challenge from the champion of Shipley on my portfolio, just as he has challenged me in my previous portfolios. I would be more than happy to look at particular problems in his local fire service if he believes there are any, but we have recently instituted and had the results of the first inspection regime of fire and rescue services for some time. It has been reassuring in parts, but it does point towards particular areas we need to address. As I say, we had a good settlement from the Treasury this year from the financial point of view, and it will be for local fire and rescue chiefs to decide how they invest that extra money.

**Police Officer Numbers: Sussex**

13. **Maria Caulfield** (Lewes) (Con): What steps she is taking to increase the number of police officers in Sussex.

**The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel):** The Government are committed to recruiting 20,000 new police officers over the next three years, with energy and pace. This reflects the biggest recruitment drive in decades, and I know my hon. Friend will welcome the recent announcement that Sussex police have been allocated another 129 officers in the first year of the programme.

**Maria Caulfield**: I thank the Home Secretary for her answer. Will she join me in welcoming the announcement from Sussex police that they intend to use their extra funding to reintroduce PCSOs across towns and villages in Lewes?

**Priti Patel**: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and I know that he will welcome the increase in police numbers—more than 1,300 for the Metropolitan police service. Of course, the issue is now all about local police presence and ensuring that more officers are on the beat. That is exactly what will happen in his borough.

**Counter-terrorism**

14. **Sir John Hayes** (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): What steps she is taking to provide security and law enforcement organisations with the tools they need to counter terrorism.

**The Minister for Security (Brandon Lewis):** It is crucial that our security and law enforcement organisations have the tools needed to keep our people safe. A review of powers was undertaken as part of Contest, our updated comprehensive counter-terrorism strategy. In February this year, the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019 received Royal Assent. It ensures that our security and intelligence agencies, prosecutors and the judiciary have the powers they need to counter the threat.

**Sir John Hayes**: Identifying indoctrination by Islamists and similar fanatics is essential to providing the good order that Edmund Burke characterised as the hallmark of good government. As the Minister will know, the Prevent duty on local authorities obliges them to play their part in that effort. Mindful of the fresh guidance that has been published—I have it here—will the Minister now review the practice of those public bodies, identify what is going well and sanction those who are not doing their duty?

**Brandon Lewis**: My right hon. Friend makes an important point. He was instrumental in the introduction and delivery of the Prevent duty, to the benefit of everybody. There is obviously work for us to do on extremism, including the unwanted growth in right-wing extremism, which we want to bring down. We are therefore always reviewing how the programmes work, to ensure that everybody is kept as safe as possible.

**Nick Thomas-Symonds** (Torfaen) (Lab): International action is, of course, required to tackle terrorism. Paragraph 78 of the political declaration, as it stands, refers to a “balanced security partnership” after Brexit. But the reality is that, three years on, the Government are no further forward in agreeing the security treaty promised by the former Prime Minister and have not put forward any ideas about how to reconcile the UK’s position as an EU third country with the level of security co-operation that we have now. Given the continuing risk of no deal, is not the Government’s attitude to our future security arrangements little short of negligent?

**Brandon Lewis**: I am disappointed that the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues did not vote for the programme motion the other day, so that we could actually have got on with the withdrawal agreement Bill, to get towards delivering on a deal with the EU and ensure that we get a good outcome. The Government’s work to prepare for no deal has continued, with meetings on a daily basis, to ensure that we are ready for when we leave. We have excellent agencies and good working
across Europe—and, indeed, globally: the work we do for Interpol also plays an important part as we go forward.

Low-level Crimes

15. Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): What her policy is on the investigation of low-level crimes.

The Minister for Crime, Policing and the Fire Service (Kit Malthouse): We expect all crimes reported to the police to be investigated appropriately. Chief constables and police and crime commissioners are responsible for ensuring that cases are investigated properly. Together with the Crown Prosecution Service, they must make sure that charges are brought in cases where there is sufficient evidence and it is in the public interest to do so.

Mr Robertson: I thank the Minister for that answer, but section 176 of the Anti-social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014 makes theft from a shop of goods worth £200 or less a summary-only offence. According to the National Federation of Retail Newsagents, shoplifting crime has increased since then. Will the Minister have a look at what is going on and what can be done to reduce retail theft?

Kit Malthouse: My hon. Friend has been a persistent champion for those in the retail trade who are subject to crime. I will be more than happy to look at the point where there is an assault on an emergency worker, it is an assault on us all.

Mr Speaker: I am sure the hon. Member for Tewkesbury (Mr Robertson) is greatly gratified to know that he is not merely a champion, but a persistent one at that.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): It feels, unfortunately, as though the police and the Crown Prosecution Service still think that an assault on an emergency worker is a low-level crime and that, frankly, magistrates often say, “Well, a little bit of violence is just in the way of doing your job.” Surely, we must reverse this trend. When there is an assault on an emergency worker, it is an assault on us all.

Kit Malthouse: I think that the hon. Gentleman speaks for us all. In my view, anyone who raises a hand in malice against an emergency worker should face the severest possible penalties.

Topical Questions

T1. [900183] Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): I would like to begin by remembering the 39 people who died in horrific circumstances last week trying to reach the United Kingdom. The thoughts of the whole country are with them and their families, and I would like to pay tribute to the emergency services who responded with such professionalism. Our focus now is to bring the perpetrators to justice.

Craig Tracey: May I welcome the recent increase in police numbers across Warwickshire, which will see 191 new officers recruited? My constituents will particularly welcome the creation of a rural crime team in north Warwickshire. Will the Secretary of State join me in congratulating our excellent police and crime commissioner, Philip Seccombe, and chief constable, Martin Jelley, on this fantastic initiative, which will make our local area even safer than it already is?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right to praise his chief constable and his police and crime commissioner. I wish to extend thanks to them for everything they have been doing with regard to making a difference in the local community. That also means being part of our scheme and initiative to recruit 20,000 more police officers, and so I absolutely welcome that.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): We are more than two years on from the Grenfell Tower fire and insufficient regulatory reforms and continued cuts to fire services have not given the local community any reason to trust this Government. There must be scrutiny of processes and resources, not just blaming of individuals. Advice to residents on the night was to stay put as part of a strategy of containment. We need to be absolutely clear here that this is Government policy; not fire brigade policy or a policy dreamed up by firefighters. As promised after the Lakanal House inquest in 2013—that is six years ago—will the Minister commission a review into the stay-put policy as a matter of urgency?

The Minister for Crime, Policing and the Fire Service (Kit Malthouse): As you may recall, Mr Speaker, I had some responsibility for the enormous changes that are required in building regulation and fire safety procedure when I was Minister for Housing. I dispute the hon. Lady’s representation that nothing has happened. A huge amount of work is going on under the auspices of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to ensure that that kind of thing can never happen again. Having said that, the inquiry will be announcing shortly, and no doubt there will be implications for us all about what more lessons can be learned.

T3. [900185] Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Following time spent patrolling Leigh-on-Sea Broadway on Friday with two excellent police officers, I ask my right hon. Friend to look now at the availability of accommodation for people with mental health issues detained under section 136 and perhaps at some simplifying of criminal behaviour orders.

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for going out on patrol and obviously supporting Essex police in everything they do locally. He is right, and we are working with the Department of Health and Social Care to consider recommendations from the Mental Health Act 1983 review so that people in mental health crisis can receive the right support that they need. We should stop criminalising these individuals and make sure that we
are working across all institutions and local communities to ensure that they have the right kind of help and support.

T2. [900184] Dan Jarvis (Barnsley Central) (Lab): [R] Claire Throsell’s abusive husband murdered her two young boys, Jack and Paul, by burning down their family home. It is impossible to put into words the pain that she suffered as a consequence, so does the Home Secretary or the Minister agree with Claire that we urgently need the Domestic Abuse Bill to put an end to aggressive cross-examining and to ensure that children’s voices are heard in the family courts, so that no one else has to suffer the same pain that Claire has?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I have had the privilege of meeting Claire. Indeed, her Member of Parliament also set out Claire’s case and the names of Jack and Paul on Second Reading of this important Bill. We very much take on board the points that Claire and others make about the workings of the family courts. There are already measures in the Bill to address some of those concerns, but we are very much looking for the Bill Committee and the House to scrutinise our proposals so that we can ensure that the family courts are a place of justice for victims of domestic abuse and their children.

T4. [900186] Craig Whittaker (Calder Valley) (Con): Rural areas of the Calder Valley such as Stainland, Todmorden and Ripponden have seen a rise in crime in recent years. The announcement of 20,000 extra police officers is very welcome news indeed, but can my right hon. Friend tell me what the strategy is in the meantime to tackle the rise in rural crime?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is right. Rural crime blights rural communities and harms the rural economy. The National Police Chiefs’ Council’s rural affairs strategy is intended to address exactly this issue, by supporting rural communities and providing a greater focus for policing. I urge West Yorkshire police to invest in rural crime prevention through the new funding for police recruitment, training and engagement.

T6. [900188] Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I welcome the new contract for asylum seeker support in the north-east, but the Minister will be aware that there is still considerable anxiety because of the lack of guaranteed long-term accommodation and because of the long delays in accessing services provided by Migrant Help. This leaves many people, including pregnant women, without adequate support. When is she going to sort it out?

Victoria Atkins: The hon. Gentleman will know that the advice, issue reporting and eligibility service provided by Migrant Help was set up to help applicants with their applications and to provide guidance through a single, nationally operated, end-to-end service. I very much take on board his point and would be happy to meet him to discuss this issue. We want to ensure that applicants get the help they need while making their application so that the right decisions are made as promptly as possible.

T5. [900187] Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): The Vagrancy Act 1824 criminalises vulnerable people for simply having nowhere to go, and wastes valuable police time and resources with issues that could be far better managed by outreach workers and multi-agency support services. Local police officers tell me that they have plenty of other tools to deal with rough sleeping. With that in mind, will my right hon. Friend reassure me that she is engaging positively with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government in its review of this outdated, unnecessary and damaging piece of legislation?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Kennedy): I can reassure my hon. Friend that we are working with MHCLG colleagues. The Government believe that no one should be criminalised simply for sleeping rough. We committed to reviewing the Vagrancy Act in the cross-governmental rough sleeping strategy. Rough sleeping is obviously a complex issue, and we are looking closely at all the options, including retention, repeal, replacement and amendment of the Act.

T8. [900189] Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): Given that Ellesmere Port is losing its second pump, I was a little perplexed to hear from the fire Minister earlier that he thought that fire authorities had a good settlement from the Treasury this year. Will he join me in lobbying the Chancellor for extra funds for the fire service for next year, so that we can keep this vital service?

Kit Malthouse: I am sorry to hear that that pump is going, but presumably that was an operational decision by the local fire chief and fire board. We did get a 2.3% settlement, which in the great scheme of things was good for the fire service, but more investment can always be looked at. One area of investment that I have talked to the fire service about and that is of interest to me is technology—the question of what more we can invest in to make the fire service more efficient and its ability to fight fires better, and to ensure that all forces are wetter; Mr Speaker, did you know that there is a chemical that can be added to water to make it wetter and therefore more effective in putting out fires?

Mr Speaker: What an extraordinarily helpful nugget of information the Minister has vouchsafed to me and other Members of the House; he really is an encyclopedia of arguably useful information.

T8. [900190] Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): Can the Minister confirm that she is working closely with the Lord Chancellor to ensure that the Domestic Abuse Bill goes hand in hand with root-and-branch reform of family courts to make them more accessible and less intimidating places?

Victoria Atkins: My hon. Friend has hit upon one of the most common experiences of victims and survivors—namely, the trouble they feel they experience in the family courts. We want to sort this out, which is why the Home Secretary and I are bringing this Bill forward along with the Ministry of Justice and the Lord Chancellor. In fact, we will also be looking at the conclusions of the expert panel commissioned by the Ministry of Justice to examine exactly this point, to ensure that the family courts and private law courts are places of justice for all.
T10. [900192] Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): There have been reports that the Home Secretary might introduce a regional visa system—something that the Scottish Government and the SNP have been championing for some time. Is she in a position to provide us with more details on this issue?

Seema Kennedy: As the hon. Gentleman knows, immigration is an issue for the whole United Kingdom, now and after we leave the European Union.

T9. [900191] Andrew Griffiths (Burton) (Con): In Staffordshire, we welcome the 90 new police officers we are getting as part of the Government’s investment, but we also recognise the danger that those officers put themselves in every day. Officers are asking for access to Tasers in order to keep them safe. Will the Home Secretary confirm that any police officer who wants a Taser will get one, and when will they be getting hold of them?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend will know that the deployment of Tasers is an operational matter for chief constables, and it is inevitably for them to determine the number of Tasers for officers. However, we have introduced a £10 million Taser fund, and that funding will mean that over 10,000 more officers in England and Wales will have the opportunity to carry a Taser.

Jane Dodds (Brecken and Radnorshire) (LD): Rural and agricultural communities are significantly affected by a rise in such crimes. Will the Minister confirm that there will be no significant reduction in funding to rural police forces, which in fact need more funding?

Kit Malthouse: Rural police forces in England will receive the same uplift funding as the other police forces do. As somebody who represents a large and very beautiful rural constituency, I have a particular interest in making sure that rural crime does not become a Cinderella part of the service.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): As my right hon. Friend develops a new immigration system, will she ensure that she pays particular attention to its design to facilitate the movement of scientists, researchers and technicians in and out of the country to protect our world-class science base and maintain our position as a global science superpower?

The Minister for Security (Brandon Lewis): My hon. Friend makes a very good point. Yes, the Home Secretary has commissioned the Migration Advisory Committee to look at a future points-based immigration system that is intended not to be geographical but based on the skills that this country needs so that we continue to be globally leading but also globally open.

Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): Does the Minister have any plans to bring in legislation to provide that all specialist housing and registered care accommodation, both new and existing, be fitted with sprinklers?

Kit Malthouse: This policy area actually falls within the purview of the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government. I know, having been Minister for Housing until recently, that as part of the review of building regulations, the matter of sprinklers is under consideration.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Shropshire has suffered widespread and dangerous flooding over the past few days, affecting thousands of people. Would the Home Secretary like to join me in putting on record her thanks to West Mercia police and all the people from Shropshire fire and rescue services?

Priti Patel: I would absolutely like to put on record my thanks and gratitude. Flooding is a dreadful issue that has an appalling impact on people’s lives, livelihoods and homes. Of course, our fire and emergency services, the Environment Agency and police officers have done a great deal of work to provide a great deal of support and comfort to local residents.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): I have a constituent whose mother is in her 90s. She came to the UK from Poland after the second world war as a refugee. She now has dementia, and she needs to apply for settled status. She has very few documents proving her residency over the past five years. Will the Minister advise me on what she and people in her situation have to do to acquire settled status?

Priti Patel: I would be delighted to look at that application directly with the Home Office. We also have 57 voluntary organisations that have been resourced by the Home Office to reach out to individuals who will not necessarily be able to access technology easily. But, as I say, I will be very happy to look at that individual case.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): May I welcome the confirmation of additional funding for counter-terrorism in the spending review and ask my right hon. Friend what steps she is taking to counter terrorist content online?

Brandon Lewis: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. We are determined and focused in making sure that we do everything we can to ensure that we keep all our citizens safe. He rightly highlights the threat to us all of the online environment and the work that we need to do with our agencies right across the board. Great work is being done not just by the National Crime Agency but by other agencies to ensure that we are continually working to make sure that this is a safe environment. However, we all have a part to play in that, and we will continue to be focused on it in terms of finance and of policy and legislation.

John Cryer (Leyton and Wanstead) (Lab): As a direct result of Government cuts, some fire brigades have cut the crew per pump from five to four and even four to three. That is not just an operational decision; it is a direct result of cuts. How sustainable is it?

Kit Malthouse: The exact disposition of the number of firefighters on each appliance is an operational decision. / Interruption / It is. It is not my job to sit in Whitehall and decide how each fire service should run its operation. We have instituted the first inspection regime of fire and rescue services for some time, which specifically looks at
a service’s effectiveness, efficiency and ability to perform its function. Lessons will be learned from the first round of inspections, which I hope and believe will improve the service.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Having called the hon. Member for Filton and Bradley Stoke (Jack Lopresti), to avoid marital disharmony, I must call the hon. Member for Morley and Outwood (Andrea Jenkyns).

Andrea Jenkyns (Morley and Outwood) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker.
A few weeks ago, a young girl got stabbed in my constituency. The family are quite rightly frustrated, as the suspect is walking free while awaiting charges, and their young daughter has had to be put in foster care for her own safety. Will my right hon. Friend meet me to discuss how we can reunite that family?

Priti Patel: I would like to express my sympathies to the family. That is a dreadful tragedy, and I would of course be delighted to meet my hon. Friend and the family to hear much more about that case.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Is it still the Government’s aspiration for the UK to be a member of Europol?

Brandon Lewis: We have an ambitious programme of work for our future security arrangements. Other countries, such as the United States, have a relationship with Europol—in fact, I think the United States has the biggest attendance there at the moment. Europol is still an important part of our future as part of our future negotiations.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. We must move on from questions to the Home Secretary to the statement by the Home Secretary.
Major Incident in Essex

3.36 pm

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): I would like to update the House on the investigation into the tragic deaths of the 39 migrants discovered last Wednesday in Essex. This morning, the Prime Minister and I visited Thurrock in Essex, to sign the book of condolence and pay our respects to the 39 individuals who died in the most appalling circumstances in trying to reach the United Kingdom. These were people’s sons and daughters, friends and family. As victims of brutal and unscrupulous criminal gangs, they have paid the ultimate price. We have been confronted with a stark reminder of the evils of people smuggling and human trafficking. This trade is a blight on the modern world. For the sake of these victims, and for millions like them, we must do all we can to stamp it out.

I would like to pay tribute once again to the outstanding professionalism shown by all our emergency services—in particular, the swift and professional response from the East of England ambulance service, Essex County Fire and Rescue Service and Essex police, who are leading the ongoing criminal investigation—and our operational partners who are working round the clock to assist the investigation, including the National Crime Agency.

The families of the victims, at this incredibly difficult time, are in all our thoughts and have my full sympathy. Nothing can ever undo the loss that they have suffered. We owe it to them to identify those responsible and ensure that they face the full force of the law. I want to work with those families to ensure that they can bring forward any evidence they have to help solve this appalling crime. With their help, we can bring the perpetrators to justice.

I would like to remind colleagues that this will be a long and meticulous investigation. As I heard today and last week from Essex police, it will involve working with partners overseas and foreign law enforcement agencies and unravelling a threat of criminality that could stretch halfway across the world. We are already working with a range of operational partners to piece together information. The police themselves—Essex police—will need to be given the time and space to do just that, while respecting the dignity of those who have died and of course the privacy of their families. The process of identifying the victims is continuing, and I would like to stress that their nationalities have still not yet been confirmed at this stage.

On Friday, three further people were arrested in connection with the incident. A 38-year-old man and a 38-year-old woman from Warrington were arrested in Cheshire, while a 46-year-old man from Northern Ireland was arrested at Stansted airport. All three were questioned on suspicion of manslaughter and conspiracy to traffic people, and have now been released on bail.

The driver of the vehicle was 25-year-old Maurice Robinson from Northern Ireland. This morning, he appeared at Chelmsford magistrates court via video link from HMP Colnbrook. He is charged with 39 counts of manslaughter, conspiracy to traffic people, conspiracy to assist unlawful immigration and money laundering. He has been remanded in custody and is next due to appear at the Old Bailey on 25 November.

Following the devastating discovery of the lorry at Tilbury, the Home Office has set up a dedicated team to co-ordinate an immediate response and a long-term response to this tragedy. I can confirm that Border Force is increasing its presence in Purfleet. It is working alongside Essex police to gather further information regarding this incident. The Home Office will now accelerate our joint intelligence-led operation between the police, the National Crime Agency and immigration enforcement, which aims to disrupt and deter organised crime gangs using refrigerated and hard-sided lorries to smuggle clandestine migrants.

I would like to stress once again that the nationalities of the victims have not been confirmed at this stage, but work is under way to co-ordinate the international response to this incident. I have already spoken to my Belgian counterpart, Minister De Crem, to invigorate the work that is taking place across both countries. I can confirm to the House that, as of today, I have received agreement from the Belgian authorities to deploy extra UK immigration enforcement officers to Zeebrugge. I have also been in contact with other international partners to offer assistance to any foreign nationals who may have been affected by this tragedy.

Last week’s tragedy was the culmination of a broad, more general rise in global migration, but also of organised criminality. This is one of the most pressing issues for the UK, as well as for all our international partners. Illegal migration fuels organised crime, erodes public confidence and, most importantly, endangers the lives of desperate people. The perpetrators conduct their activities under a cloak of secrecy. The motivations that lead people to try to cross borders illegally are broad and complex. They are often among the most vulnerable, and then of course they are further exploited.

It is clear that we and all our partners must enhance our response. All areas of Government have a role to play—whether it is in strengthening our borders and eliminating the pull factors in this country, or in addressing many of the root causes to suppress demand for illegal migration. We already have an illegal migration strategy in place, but as the tragic events last week in Essex have shown, there is much more to do. I will be working across Government and Government Departments this week to plan how we can strengthen our response to the wider migration crisis that led these victims to try to enter the United Kingdom. The organised criminals who drive this practice are dynamic, unscrupulous and highly adaptable, but failing to confront them comes at a terrible human cost. We must be ruthless now in our response.

3.43 pm

Ms Diane Abbott (Hackney North and Stoke Newington) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for advance sight of her statement.

The events in Essex are a tragic loss of life. All death is regrettable, but this was a particularly gruesome and grotesque way to die, and an horrific experience for the first responders. Many of us in the House will have seen the images in our media over the weekend of desperate communities who are frightened that their young people may have been in that lorry. Many of us will have seen the mess 39 people from their families on the verge of their own suffocation. One woman said: “I am really, really sorry, Mum and Dad, my trip to a foreign land has failed”.

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I would like to thank the Home Secretary for the information about the arrests and about how some progress has been made in identifying the victims. However, as the investigation is ongoing and criminal charges are involved, I will not say more about this specific case.

As the Home Secretary said, people traffickers are particularly ruthless and simply do not care about human life. I was in Lesbos last year looking at the people trafficking from Turkey across the Mediterranean to Greece. The people traffickers not only deliberately took large sums of money off desperate people, but put those people in completely unseaworthy rubber dinghies. They gave people fake lifejackets and did not care that—as inevitably happened—many of them died in the Mediterranean. The people traffickers are greedy, ruthless and unscrupulous, and they have a callous disregard for human life.

I would, however, like to ask the Home Secretary whether the Home Office will be looking at security at some of the small east coast ports. I do not want to pre-empt the police investigation, but it seems that these small ports are being used because there is less security than at ports such as Dover.

I also want to ask the Home Secretary about the current co-operation with the European police, security and justice agencies in investigating this case. Specifically, how closely are our agencies, police forces and National Crime Agency working with Europol in this investigation? Will she also indicate the level of co-operation with the European Migrant Smuggling Centre, which is an agency of Europol? How are our agents benefiting from co-operation with what is the most sophisticated agency of its kind in the world?

Will the Home Secretary further explain how that co-operation can continue under a no-deal Brexit or the Prime Minister’s deal? As things stand, we will lose the current level of co-operation, we will not have real-time access to EU agency databases, and we will lose access to a host of criminal databases and to the European arrest warrant. The House would therefore like to know what plans the Home Secretary has to maintain and, if anything, strengthen that co-operation.

This is a very tragic event. In some ways, it has humanised the issue of people trafficking for many people in this country. Of course we have to bear down on the people traffickers—they are ruthless and have no concern for human life—but we also have to look at issues such as how we make those eastern ports more secure and how we guarantee people the same level of co-operation with EU agencies that we currently have.

Priti Patel: I thank the right hon. Lady for her remarks. There are a number of points I would like to make.

First, the right hon. Lady is absolutely right about the first responders. They cannot unseen what they have experienced and seen through this awful crime. Secondly, she is right to recognise the scale of trafficking and the inhumanity—there is no other word that can describe it—of the perpetrators behind not only this crime but modern slavery, people smuggling and human trafficking.

The right hon. Lady specifically asked about checks at eastern ports. Those ports are not as vast as others and do not necessarily have the large amounts of freight coming through. She will have heard me remark in my statement that, with regard to Purfleet, Border Force will obviously now be increasing its presence, but it will also be working with Essex police on targeting and on the response it needs to the incident itself, providing further information about what has happened.

The right hon. Lady asked about security and the drivers in terms of working in co-operation and in partnership with other agencies. Of course, that is exactly what we are doing right now. The National Crime Agency is, rightly, taking the lead on this investigation. As I said in my statement, it is a complicated investigation, and we are working with a number of agencies across the European Union, and with others, because of the routes that have been taken. I have no doubt that, over time, we will hear much more, and a lot more information will come out in due course.

The right hon. Lady specifically asked about Brexit and security co-operation. I would just say to the House that the way in which we can absolutely ensure that we have the strongest possible co-operation is by having a deal. That is exactly the Government’s position and I would like the right hon. Lady and her party to support it.

On co-operation and security tools, there are no boundaries when it comes to our co-operation. The United Kingdom will remain one of the safest countries in the world, as well as a global leader on security.

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for the leadership she is showing across Government on this issue. There has been a lot of talk over the past few days about the security at our east coast ports, but does she agree that it matters nothing how much security we put in place when people are being trafficked through numerous countries before arriving here and going through continental ports? Do not all jurisdictions need to step up to the plate and deliver on this?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for her comments and her question as the constituency Member of Parliament. We were together this morning to pay our respects and extend our condolences, alongside the Prime Minister. She will know, with Purfleet and Tilbury in her constituency, that the challenges are absolutely vast. She highlights the fact that we could have a huge amount of port security, which we do across the country, but that the major international issue is that serious organised crime gangs exploit vulnerable individuals from across the world who seek a better life in another country. They are the ones who have fallen victim in this case.

Joanna Cherry (Edinburgh South West) (SNP): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement and for advance sight of it. Like her, my thoughts, and those of my colleagues in the Scottish National party, are with the families of the victims, who it seems are far away and desperately trying to gather information about what might have happened to their loved ones. It is very difficult to fathom what it must be like to lose a loved one in such dreadful circumstances. I also join her in paying tribute to the response of the emergency services. I would like to express my concern for their wellbeing, given what they have seen.
I associate myself with what the Home Secretary said about the gross immorality and inhumanity of people smuggling. I will speak about the specifics rather than this case, as it is an ongoing investigation. As the shadow Home Secretary said, an international trafficking and smuggling network can only be broken up through international co-operation. I know that the Home Secretary recognises that. She will also recognise that the European Migrant Smuggling Centre, which is a part of Europol, has been at the heart of this inquiry and of other inquiries into similar tragedies. A Europol source has been quoted as saying that the investigators at Europol are:

“working around the clock trying to put together the pieces of the puzzle.”

I know the Home Secretary is keen for us to support the deal to leave the European Union, but that deal does not adequately address what plans the Government have to work with those vital EU institutions in future. It simply will not do to say that America has a relationship with Europol, because America is not in Europe—we are.

The UN’s trafficking envoy has said that withdrawing from Europol and Eurojust could curtail the UK’s ability to conduct the transnational investigations required to dismantle smuggling networks. Does she accept that leaving the European Union will make such investigations more difficult? If not, will she take this opportunity to clarify, in a way that she was unable to do before the Home Affairs Committee last week, what relationship she thinks the UK should have with those institutions following Brexit?

Priti Patel: I thank the hon. and learned Lady for her comments on the actual incident in Essex, and on the issue at hand in terms of people smuggling and the 39 deaths. On her comments about security co-operation, I re-emphasise and restate that we continue to be one of the safest countries in the world and we will be a global leader in security.

The hon. and learned Lady asks about Europol. We can continue to work with Europol when we leave the EU: it is possible for third countries to do that, and there are very good examples of third countries, including the United States, doing so.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): This is indeed a terrible tragedy and, of course, our hearts go out to all the families concerned. I thank my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary for praising the outstanding professionals in our emergency services. I also thank all those at Chelmsford magistrates court, where the case has been heard this morning; the Essex coroner and her deeply dedicated team, who are based in Chelmsford; all those working on the investigation at Essex police headquarters, which is also in Chelmsford; and the staff at Broomfield Hospital, which is just outside my constituency in the Saffron Walden constituency but is nevertheless where many of my Chelmsford constituents work—I understand that the bodies of the victims have been taken there. It is very clear that this incident will impact on very many people. Will the Home Secretary confirm that all support and resources will be available in the short and longer terms?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I thank her for highlighting the wide range of local organisations across the county of Essex, in her constituency and neighbouring constituencies, that have been involved in this terrible, appalling tragedy, including those in the NHS and the coroner. We have discussed on several occasions since last Wednesday, including with the Prime Minister this morning, the type of support that will be put in place, because it is not just short-term support for the individuals who have been affected, the individuals who are now part of the investigation, and the inquiries and the post mortem that is taking place. It ranges from the TRiM—trauma risk management—process with the police and the ambulance service to the welfare service provision that will be put in place not just for today, but for the long term for everyone who has been involved in providing vital support to the police for this investigation.

Yvette Cooper (Normanton, Pontefract and Castleford) (Lab): The Home Secretary will be aware of the disturbing news that children were found in another refrigerated lorry yesterday, this time at Calais. They were reportedly already suffering from mild hypothermia and were, luckily, found before it was too late. The refrigerated lorries are particularly dangerous and make this an appalling crime. Will the Home Secretary say whether it is correct that hardly any checks of refrigerated lorries are taking place at the moment at Zeebrugge, and that at Purfleet 24/7 checks are still not taking place? She still has not explained what work is being done with Europol’s European Migrant Smuggling Centre. Is she working with that centre, and does she agree that we should continue to participate in it after December 2020?

Priti Patel: I thank the right hon. Lady for her comments. Let me be clear to the House: any form of trafficking and smuggling of individuals is completely wrong. She rightly highlights the appalling use of refrigerated lorries, which is effectively what we have seen in the case that she mentions and in what happened in Essex last week. The fact that these containers have been used and are being exploited by criminal gangs is a major issue that affects not just this country but other countries.

The right hon. Lady asks about checks; there are checks, and checks have been made when it comes to refrigerated lorries not just in the UK, but in other ports. She will appreciate, however, that, with the investigation that is taking place and the links with the Belgian authorities, there is much more information to come, specifically on the vehicle and the container that came through that particular port.

There are checks that take place in Zeebrugge as well. I said in my statement that we will escalate our work. There is a plan, working with my Belgian counterpart, to address the specifics of security issues in Zeebrugge and how we can extend more checks if required, although that is an operational decision not just at the port but with the Belgian authorities.

On the right hon. Lady’s question about co-operation, it is right that we co-operate internationally with all partners and all agencies—so, yes, that work is absolutely under way. There must be no doubt that even after we leave the EU, that co-operation will continue. As Home Secretary, I will not move away from high levels of co-operation. We will work day and night to make sure that we have the right processes and structures in place to ensure that that international collaboration continues and grows.
Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): The heartbreaking texts and final messages underline the abject misery, terror and horror of this modern slave trader practice. Is not our hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) absolutely right that we need to handle this, above all, with a new international convention, as current international arrangements are outdated, ineffective and patently not fit for today’s needs?

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend is right to raise that issue, as he has done previously. It is clear that this is not a UK-specific issue but an international one. While a great deal of work is done internationally, through global compacts and migration funds, there is much more we can do, working collaboratively with international partners and our friends and allies, to deal with the root causes—the upstream issues—and criminality and to put something into statute globally to stop this happening again.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): Our outrage continues. The latest statistics from the National Crime Agency show that the top nationalities for potential victims of trafficking to the UK were Albanian, Vietnamese and Chinese. Given what we may or may not know, what discussions has the Home Secretary had, particularly with Albania, China and Vietnam, about what is going on and what more can be done to stop it?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. He will know, through his work on the all-party group on human trafficking and modern slavery, that there are specific source countries—he named some of them—where we see far too much trafficking and criminality. There are discussions taking place—I will not reel them all off, but I have been involved in some—and many more will follow. I emphasise, however, that, outside the Home Office, much more can be done across other Departments, and I will pursue that this week. We have seen various streams of activity by other Departments, but we need to join that up to ensure that we speak with one voice to these countries and that we ourselves have a much more coherent approach.

Mr David Jones (Clwyd West) (Con): It has been reported that the lorry entered the UK at the port of Holyhead before travelling on to Purfleet to collect the container. Given that the UK and Ireland are part of the same common travel area, and will remain so after Brexit, can my right hon. Friend confirm that North Wales police are and will remain adequately resourced to provide a sufficient presence at Holyhead to deter and detect such activity?

Priti Patel: Absolutely. Of course, resourcing the police to support Holyhead is just part of the process, and it is not just about this investigation; it is about ensuring we have the right level of security and the measures in place to enable police officers and others, including Border Force, to act on intelligence. It is worth reiterating something I said in my last statement: we are working with the Police Service of Northern Ireland in this investigation, which speaks to the many links between police forces.

Wayne David (Caerphilly) (Lab): I thank the Home Secretary for her statement. A number of the 39 victims may well have come from Vietnam. If so, may I, as chair of the all-party group on Vietnam, offer my heartfelt sympathies to the victims and families? We know that the Prime Minister of Vietnam has announced an inquiry into human trafficking in his country. May I have a commitment from the Home Secretary that her Government will fully co-operate with the Government of Vietnam to make sure that this terrible trade is eliminated?

Priti Patel: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his remarks and the work he does through the all-party group. Although the nationalities have yet to be confirmed, as I touched on in my statement, we will of course work with all our partners. I have already spoken to the Vietnamese ambassador. Many discussions are under way that, as he will understand, are very sensitive at this stage, but we will of course co-operate with any inquiries into human trafficking and people smuggling.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): The Home Secretary has mentioned Northern Ireland. In that context, will she assure me that the Criminal Assets Bureau will have all the resources it requires to play a full part in the investigation? Does she agree that it is time that unexplained wealth orders were in force in Northern Ireland, as in the rest of the United Kingdom?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend makes a very important point. Of course, there is always more that we must do when it comes to seizing cash and assets from the perpetrators of crime. He is right: there is absolutely much more that we can do. At this stage, we will look into everything in the light of the inquiry and investigation, but I will continue to discuss with the Ministry of Justice how we can upscale some of it.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): On the question of utilising intelligence, there were reports over the weekend that people living near the Waterglade industrial park had previously reported seeing migrants being dropped off from lorries, and, indeed, had found discarded foreign passports at the site, but that their reports were not followed up. Will the Home Secretary comment on that?

Priti Patel: We have received no formal reports of anything of that nature, but we will obviously follow up any evidence of wrongdoing or the discarding of foreign documents.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): No one could fail to be moved by the terrible stories of young lives that were literally snuffed out. I appreciate that my right hon. Friend cannot say where the victims came from, but I know that in the past some victims have been identified as coming from Vietnam, and that the UK has a very strong ministerial strategic dialogue with Vietnam. Will the Home Secretary ensure that at the next meeting she discusses with her officials how we can communicate to these young people, jointly, the message that they should not make this dangerous journey?
Priti Patel: That dialogue is already under way, and, in view of the terrible tragedy that has taken place, it is right that it is under way.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): Human trafficking is indeed a terrible crime, and the perpetrators must be brought to justice. Ironically, it is some of the victims who have already arrived in this country who know most about these criminals and their methods, and it would assist us hugely if we could persuade them to turn Queen’s evidence without fear of retribution or deportation. Does the Home Secretary agree that we should look at mechanisms whereby that might happen without their being too fearful to come forward and help us?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and I can assure the House that in this particular investigation, that is exactly how we will be working.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): These containers are not necessarily moved around on the backs of lorries, but may be parked on ferries and so on. Can my right hon. Friend assure me that the authorities, Border Force and the police—and, indeed, the drivers of the lorries—have the means and the competence to open the containers if necessary?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend raises some important points. There are a number of ways of providing support for lorry drivers and others. A great deal of work is done through road haulage associations in the UK and across the EU to provide information and intelligence about what to do in situations of this nature, and also about how they can protect themselves from trafficking. If there is anything else that my hon. Friend would like to know about the Home Office’s and Border Force’s work and about how we collaborate with many other organisations, I shall be happy to write to him.

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): Hull has a long and proud tradition of fighting the evils of human trafficking and slavery. Many of my constituents have been in touch to say how shocked they are about what happened in Essex. They want to know whether additional checks will be carried out at the port of Hull, particularly on refrigerated containers, because we now know that the traffickers seem to be turning their attention to ports on the east coast.

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady is absolutely right. She will know, with the port in her own constituency, that various challenges have now been highlighted. It is important to acknowledge that those who are trafficking people are trying to exploit any vulnerabilities in any aspects of port security, such as, as we have seen, with the refrigerated lorries. Given the work taking place specifically with Border Force right now, I would like to drop the hon. Lady a line and at least keep her updated on the changes that will be forthcoming with regard to the port in Hull.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for coming to the House to make this statement, because it demonstrates how seriously the Government take this matter. Will she spare a thought for the Border Force officers in Harwich, which I represent, who will be haunted by the possibility of a similar tragedy passing through their care? I am confident that they have sufficient capability, on an intelligence-led basis, to make checks, but they cannot check every single container. Will she also bear in mind the fact that when I have alerted the Essex police and the Essex Border Force to activity on the Essex coast reported by constituents they have always been very swift to respond, and indeed have closed down one operation very effectively already?

Priti Patel: I thank my hon. Friend for his comments and, being a neighbouring Member of Parliament, I do know Harwich. He is right to point out that all port operators and border staff around the country will be looking at what has happened over the last week with shared horror. They will be taking the right action in their own day-to-day work on risk-based checks, but at this stage I want to give the House the assurance that we are giving Border Force all the support it needs and we are working collaboratively with port operators. I also thank my hon. Friend for his work with Essex police when he has raised concerns in respect of the port of Harwich and on how to deal with those issues.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): The Home Secretary will know that three years ago the Chief Inspector of Borders and Immigration produced a report on the east coast ports that raised a number of concerns about their operation. Will she agree to look again at the recommendations of the Border Force inspector to see whether she can update the House on the implementation of those recommendations?

Priti Patel: I have gone through that report and seen the recommendations. I am currently reviewing aspects of them, but in particular how we can make them more relevant, because that was a report from 2016—although the findings were published in 2017—and things have clearly moved on since then. But of course there is another factor here: the extent of the organised international criminality, as well as many of the port security features that were raised in that report that also need to be looked at.

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Ind): I thank my right hon. Friend for her powerful statement and the seriousness with which she has taken this very serious matter. She will be aware that small ports and airfields have long been known to be a problem and security weakness; indeed, the former Prime Minister proposed a volunteer force to patrol them. May I urge her not to have a Dad’s Army set up like that but instead to have more investment in our Border Force, the National Crime Agency and in working internationally with our partners to combat this appalling and evil trade?

Priti Patel: My hon. Friend is absolutely right, and we are speaking here about international organised criminality through various gangs, routes and countries where this facilitation is taking place. It is right that we invest, and we are investing in the NCA and through our partners, such as our Border Force, and through police and through all aspects of our homeland security, and we will continue to do that.
Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): The Home Secretary will know that the Government asked her right hon. Friend, the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), Lady Butler-Sloss and me to review the Modern Slavery Act 2015. During our inquiry we met Border Force staff from a large, not a small, port, and they told us that, unlike for airports where there are passenger lists, they know nothing—absolutely nothing—about the people who are coming through the ports. We asked to meet the Home Secretary urgently to talk about this. Might she speed up our meeting with her, please?

Priti Patel: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for raising his concerns. The answer is yes, of course I would be delighted to meet him. On top of that, he is right to recognise, through his review, the difference between air and sea in terms of the data that are collected. It is clear that when it comes to goods, there are customs checks, declarations and manifests, but when it comes to people we will obviously need to continue our discussions to see what more we can do in that area.

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): May I offer my sympathy to the victims and their families? I concur with my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) that the message today is that we need stronger borders, not weaker ones, not just here but across Europe. While I am talking about that, may I just touch on South Dorset, whose police and crime commissioner has called for more officials at Portland port? Will my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary look at that, too?

Priti Patel: I would be more than happy to discuss port support with my hon. Friend and to talk about what more can be done in his area. He is right to identify the need to protect our ports and to ensure that we have the right checks and processes in place across the entire country—which we do as part of the risk-based system—and that they are operated in a consistent way.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Four members of an organised crime gang operating out of Govanhill in my constituency were recently convicted in the High Court in Glasgow of offences relating to the trafficking of 14 vulnerable women. That was a complex, five-year-long investigation led by Police Scotland but also involving UK police forces, Europol, Europol and the Slovak police force. I understand that a parallel court case is ongoing in Slovakia. Can the Home Secretary guarantee that the police in Scotland will have exactly the same access to that level of co-operation, post Brexit? Will Brexit have any impact on ongoing cases?

Priti Patel: The hon. Lady has just highlighted how complicated international criminal investigations are. We will expect to see exactly a similar meticulous process in the case in Essex. It is right that we continue all avenues of international co-operation, not just now but when we leave the European Union.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Ind): As the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to Vietnam, I echo the comments made by the chairman of the all-party parliamentary group on Vietnam, the hon. Member for Caerphilly (Wayne David). I should like to extend my thanks to the Vietnamese ambassador to the UK, Ambassador An, and to the Vietnamese Government for their co-operation. I also extend my condolences. I also echo the Home Secretary’s comments. As a trade envoy, I see the Department for International Trade, the Foreign Office and the Ministry of Defence in Vietnam all the time. We discuss these issues, but, as my right hon. Friend has suggested, more co-ordination between Government Departments would be very welcome.

Priti Patel: My right hon. Friend will know from his own experience the way in which the Government work together, but there are now specific fundamental challenges. If we are going to stop countries continuing the facilitation of illegal people trafficking and migrant movements, there is more that we can do across Government. I look forward to his work and his support in trying to address some of those issues.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): All too often, there is another layer of cruel injustice, which is that families in very poor districts—for instance, in Vietnam—have done everything in their power, including remortgaging their lands, to raise enough money to send a favoured son or daughter through one of these illegal routes. They then lose not only their child but their land and their means of making a living. Is there nothing we can do to try to strike down these hideous financial deals?

Priti Patel: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. In people smuggling and the trafficking of individuals, we are witnessing the worst of the worst. We are seeing perpetrators exploiting vulnerable individuals and families more often than not putting them into debt bondage. They lose their livelihoods and they are then exploited once their children or family members arrive in another country. There is more that we can do—there is no doubt about that—but that can be achieved only through bilateral co-operation and international standards and co-operation across the board, so that we have consistency. If we are going to stop this practice happening, we have to stop vulnerable families being exploited. From the British Government’s perspective, yes we will do more, but we will also lead calls internationally to try to root this out.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): As the other Member of Parliament for Thurrock, may I say that we remain shocked and appalled by the events? We can only imagine the pain that the families must be feeling. I pay tribute not only to the first responders but to council officers and councillors, many of whom are my constituents, who have stepped up to meet the challenge. To deter further attempts at moving people in this despicable way, what discussions has my right hon. Friend had both here and abroad about the issue?

Priti Patel: I echo my hon. Friend’s words of thanks to Thurrock Council for its work. Having met the leader of the council and other staff this morning, I am grateful to them for their local support. Technology can play a significant role here. It is pretty clear that refrigerated vehicles and containers are being exploited for a range of reasons. The Home Office is investing a great deal not only in research but in new technology for enhancements in border controls. We must also do much more internationally in this area.
Shared Rural Network

4.20 pm

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nicky Morgan): With your permission, Mr Speaker, I will make a statement to the House about connectivity and our recent announcement about the shared rural network. Last month, this Government announced £5 billion to accelerate the roll-out of the highest-speed internet across the country, including in our rural heartlands. The money is being targeted towards the hardest-to-reach areas of the UK, so that they will not have to wait for their homes and businesses to be connected to fast, reliable broadband. They will be given connections capable of download speeds of 1 gigabit per second to take advantage of everything that the next generation of new technology has to offer.

Connectivity on the go is equally important. Mobile phones are revolutionising our day-to-day lives and are crucial for businesses as they compete and grow. Half of adults—I reckon this will apply to pretty much every right hon. and hon. Member—say that they missed their mobile phone the most of all their devices, with one in three saying that they never use a computer to go online.

However, too many areas of the country are still waiting for high-quality mobile coverage. Today, only 66% of the UK landmass has geographic coverage from all four mobile network operators and 9%, largely in rural areas, has no coverage at all. I am therefore pleased to inform the House that last week the Government announced support for a shared rural network programme, subject to binding legal agreement being concluded. The proposal has been brought to Government by the four UK mobile network operators—EE, Vodafone, 3 and O2—and sets out their ambition to collectively increase 4G mobile coverage throughout the United Kingdom to 95% by 2025.

Under the proposal, areas that have coverage from only some providers—partial notspots—will be almost entirely eliminated, meaning that we will get good 4G signal anywhere, no matter our provider. It also promises to deliver greater coverage in the total notspots—the areas that currently have no mobile phone signal at all. The network will result in 95% of the UK getting coverage, including additional coverage to 16,000 km of roads and 280,000 premises. The biggest improvements will be felt in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The four operators will commit up to £530 million to get rid of the partial notspots, but we recognise the difficulty of building infrastructure in remote locations. The Government are therefore sharing the cost and are prepared to provide a further £500 million to eliminate total notspots. The Government’s investment will provide new digital infrastructure in areas that are not commercially viable for operators, to ensure that this new service provision continues for at least 20 years. It will also cover the cost of upgrades to the emergency services infrastructure, making it available to commercial operators.

The announcement is great news for consumers and a big step forward by the mobile network operators. It will be underpinned by legally binding commitments from each operator to reach more than 92% UK coverage by 2026. The mobile network operators will adopt new coverage obligations within their existing spectrum licence conditions to ensure that the outcomes will be delivered. If they cannot demonstrate that all reasonable efforts have been made to comply with the obligations, there are penalties for the operators, with a maximum fine of up to 10% of annual turnover. Although 2025 is the target date, many consumers will feel the benefit of the programme long before its conclusion. Annual coverage improvement targets will be published, and Ofcom will report regularly on the shared rural network’s progress in its “Connected Nations” publication.

The UK has a vibrant telecoms industry, and we are keen that the shared rural network proposal reflects that. The programme will be jointly delivered by all four mobile network operators, but it is expected that organisations from across the industry would have the opportunity to get involved in delivering the programme at various levels of the supply chain, building the required infrastructure in an open, fair and transparent way.

The mobile network operator proposal is conditional on Ofcom removing its proposed coverage commitments, which were included in the design of the original auction. I have written to Sharon White, the chief executive of Ofcom, setting out the Government’s support for the programme, subject to a binding legal agreement being concluded. It is for Ofcom to decide how it wishes to proceed with the auction. This morning, Ofcom opened its consultation on an alternative auction design, without coverage obligations.

I have also made it clear to the mobile network operators and to Ofcom that the Government retain the right to support the original Ofcom auction if a final and legally binding agreement on the shared rural network is not reached. I have considered the shared rural network proposal carefully, along with my right hon. Friend the Chancellor of the Exchequer, and I am satisfied that it improves on the coverage obligations set out in Ofcom’s proposed auction and should deliver good value for money. However, I have made it clear to the mobile network operators that, until a final agreement is reached, the Government’s support does not make a legally binding arrangement or contract and does not create any expectation that Government will act in that way.

In the coming months, the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, Ofcom and the mobile operators will work to finalise the legal agreement so that we can get on with the important job of improving mobile coverage. The operators share our ambition. I am confident that this proposal is the answer, and I expect to be in a position to update the House early next year.

This is a world-first deal that means that consumers will be able to rely on their own provider’s network to use their mobile phones wherever they are. It will make patchy coverage a thing of the past and mean that more people in rural areas can benefit from the speed and efficiency of coverage on the go. This Government are committed to giving rural areas across our United Kingdom the digital connectivity needed to flourish and to make the UK a world leader in 5G technologies. That is what this landmark investment will do. I commend this statement to the House.

4.27 pm

Liam Byrne (Birmingham, Hodge Hill) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for advance sight of her statement. May I start by welcoming her professed enthusiasm for pulling this country out of the cyber slow lane? However,
having read her statement, I am afraid to say that, on close examination, it would appear that our Teletext Tories will have to do rather better than this.

Let me start, for the benefit of hon. Members, with the points on which we agree. It is surely right that we dramatically step up the efforts to pull the country into the 21st century. We were a leader once. Now the networks that we have, like the targets that we have set, are far behind the best in the world; so while today’s progress is, I suppose, welcome, it is really half of a half-measure, when what was needed was a bold 10-year national switchover plan to deliver ubiquitous gigabit per second access to every corner of the country.

At our most generous, we welcome the commitment to 95% 4G coverage, because it is better than the 91% that we have today, but I am afraid that still leaves a 4,681 square mile area of the country where coverage will be non-existent or not good enough. As Members know, that is an area twice the size of Norfolk and much bigger than our largest county, North Yorkshire. Nor, it would appear, will progress be as rapid as was promised. In its manifesto, the Conservative party promised 95% coverage by 2022. Now the Secretary of State says it is 2025, and the industry briefing issued this morning says that will not be achieved until 2026.

Nor is the proposal as well financed as is needed. Ofcom says that the cost of sorting out all the notspots in the country is between £3 billion and £6 billion, yet just £1 billion has been announced, half from industry and half from Government. At best, it is half of a half-measure. Nor, it seems, is the deal with the industry actually done. As the Secretary of State made clear in her statement, “the Government’s support does not make a legally binding arrangement or contract and does not create any expectation that Government will act in that way.”

That is known as the small print; in this House, we call it, at best, a running commentary on what she is doing in the office this week. It is a running commentary on half of a half-measure that is four years late and leaves an area of the country twice the size of Norfolk without the coverage it needs. Members will therefore forgive us for not applauding this announcement from the rooftops.

However, to take this announcement seriously for a moment, which is more than the Chancellor obviously has, I suppose we should trouble the Secretary of State with some questions on her running commentary on half of a half-measure. Her Majesty’s Government have already backtracked on their commitment to full fibre roll-out by 2025. Can she reassure the House that this measure, such as it is, will not be diluted any further? Will she bless us with some interim targets? Perhaps they could be knocked together. If so, are we likely to see them any time soon? She told us today that the paperwork is not going to be signed until 2020, but she says that Ofcom has announced that it is moving ahead with a consultation on the spectrum auction, without coverage obligations. Why is Ofcom proceeding with that, given that the Secretary of State is commending this different approach to us this afternoon? Under the plans will consumers be able to access a choice of all four network operators in the 95% area that she has sketched out? Finally, I suppose the Secretary of State should be asked to tell us whether she agrees with Ofcom that £3 billion to £6 billion is going to be needed to eliminate all notspots in the country. If she does agree, will she explain why she is not bringing that proposal to us this afternoon?

Today our network ranks not as the first, second or third best in the world, but as the 26th. Some 82% of our constituencies do not enjoy 4G coverage from all big four operators. I know the Secretary of State has done her very best today to dress this up, but we should call it what it is: too little, too late, for a country that deserves far better.

Nicky Morgan: I thank the right hon. Gentleman—I think—for the response to the statement. The paltry support he got from those on his Benches when he sat down showed that they did not think much of it either. It was a typical grudging response from the Labour party, rather than a recognition that this is a significant step forward for consumers and for our constituents. Just to answer some of the questions he put on behalf of the Labour luddites in this House, let me say that the 95% target for 2025 is achieved by getting to just over 92% by 2026. This is a clear commitment given by the four mobile network operators, and it is actually much better than achieving it either through the spectrum auction or through any other roaming proposals. It is right that we should see that this is delivered properly and comprehensively across the UK, rather than rushing, although we are clear about the 2025 target.

On interim targets, we are obviously going to wait for industry to say how quickly it is able to do the roll-out, but I was clear in my statement to say that many areas will see this coverage much more quickly.

On the letter from Ofcom, it is obviously a decision for Ofcom as to whether to carry on with the auction coverage. However, I suggest that the right hon. Gentleman read Sharon White’s letter, because she is very clear that by following this proposal and sharing infrastructure, “the four operators can deliver much greater improvements in coverage at less cost than they could do individually”, and:

“We believe this is an efficient way of improving coverage which should provide a better experience for consumers than other alternatives like rural roaming.”

The right hon. Gentleman asked whether all four were included in the 95%, and that is absolutely the case.

This is a significant moment for improving mobile connectivity, which is absolutely essential to making sure that the UK plays its part in being able to develop, use and innovate the technologies of the future. I would hope that all those who hope for coverage in areas such as the west midlands, which is leading the charge in terms of the 5G test beds, under the brilliant mayoralty of Andy Street, could celebrate rather than offer this grudging response today.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Ind): When the previous Prime Minister rang to fire me from my position as telecoms Minister, she could not get through because I did not have a signal on my mobile phone, so this announcement today is close to my heart. May I ask the Secretary of State to update the House on any changes to planning regulations, which are often the barrier to erecting much-needed mobile phone masts in rural areas?
Nicky Morgan: I thank my right hon. Friend very much for his question. As he will know, at the end of August we announced a consultation, which closes on 4 November, about how we can simplify the planning process in relation to mobile phone masts. Obviously, a balance needs to be struck between having masts and coverage right the way across the country and allowing local communities to have their say. We await the responses to the consultation and will bring forward further proposals to the House.

Mr Speaker: I call Chi Onwurah.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): I am glad not to be forgotten.

In the words of the author Arthur Herman, “Scotland invented the modern world”, but the reality is that Scotland is now being held back by this Tory Government. The Scottish National party welcomes the Government’s announcement about the shared rural network proposals; if they are delivered with the improvements that the Secretary of State says there will be, they will be improvements for our rural and island communities. But even with that investment, Scotland’s 4G coverage level would still be below the overall UK-wide geographic coverage figure of 95%, leaving further work to be done.

I have to say that I am pleased that the Secretary of State seems to possess a more realistic understanding of what the devolution agreement actually is than her Scottish Tory colleagues. She is aware, it is clear, that telecommunications is a reserved matter. But with Scotland receiving just 3% of UK Government funding for broadband, compared with Northern Ireland’s 91% funding, will she reassure me that the programme will be rolled out and that, when it is, we will get a fairer funding settlement than we have had thus far?

People hearing this announcement today could be forgiven for having a sense of déjà vu. The 2017 Conservative manifesto promised to end rural notspots by 2022—a target that we know will not be met. We are waiting for the 2017 funding settlement than we have had thus far?

Mr Speaker: I call Hannah Bardell.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker; I am glad not to be forgotten.

Mr Speaker: I apologise to the hon. Lady; I meant to call Hannah Bardell.

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker; I am glad not to be forgotten.

I thank the hon. Lady very much for her question. In talking about the difficulties and the disappointments, she almost ran out of time to actually ask her questions. She is right to say that connectivity is hugely important for all our constituents wherever they are. There will be, as she will know if she looks at the detail, a shared rural network entity, to which all four mobile network operators will be party, and that is the way they will be held accountable by the Department for the targets they are meeting.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): May I congratulate my right hon. Friend on persuading the mobile operators to do what they resisted and told us was completely impossible for them to do? When she comes to address the final 5%—the notspots—will she ensure that lessons are learned from the previous attempt, which was the mobile infrastructure project? Unfortunately, that was able to deliver only a fraction of the number of miles promised, given the numerous obstacles that it ran into.

Nicky Morgan: I thank my right hon. Friend. As a former Secretary of State for Culture, Media and Sport, he will understand the significant challenges that there have been to bring everyone together to work on this. He is right to point out that there will always be a final 5%, but there are other proposals such as the roll-out of broadband, all of which have to be taken in the round.

We are talking about 4G today, but there are also the 5G proposals and broadband. We know that this is a challenge and that it is in the most rural areas that connectivity is most important.

Chi Onwurah: Businesses and citizens across this country suffer the consequences of the Tories’ ideology of austerity, which prevented proper investment in our digital infrastructure. Rural broadband is not a next generation “nice to have”, but a necessity here and now. Therefore, given this agreement for shared infrastructure, will the Secretary of State say what the quality requirements are for uplink, downlink, latency and congestion; how rural areas will benefit from the infrastructure competition that there still will be in the rest of the country—will he commit to there still being an infrastructure competition in the rest of the country—and how we can make sure that the telecom companies are accountable for the public money that they will be given to make this happen?

Nicky Morgan: I thank the hon. Lady very much for her question. In talking about the difficulties and the disappointments, she almost ran out of time to actually ask her questions. She is right to say that connectivity is hugely important for all our constituents wherever they are. There will be, as she will know if she looks at the detail, a shared rural network entity, to which all four mobile network operators will be party, and that is the way they will be held accountable by the Department for the targets they are meeting.

Jeremy Wright (Kenilworth and Southam) (Con): I suspect that, had my right hon. Friend announced a coverage improvement to 195%, the Labour party would still not have said that it was enough. Some of us can see this for what it is, which is a significant step in the right direction, on which I congratulate her. None the less, does she agree that, as she said, this is a voluntary agreement in exchange for removal of conditions on a spectrum auction, and that it is sensible to make sure that Ofcom keeps compulsory roaming on the table until the ink is dry on a voluntary agreement to make it happen?

Nicky Morgan: I thank my right hon. and learned Friend very much. There appears to be a surfeit of former holders of my office on these Benches today, which is a sign of just how much time everyone in this job has had to invest in getting to this stage. He is right that it would not have mattered what we announced
today, the Labour party would have found reason to disagree with it, which is unfair to the people they represent. He is absolutely right that we need to keep all the options on the table until that legally binding agreement is concluded, and that is what we will both be doing.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Well, I welcome what the right hon. Lady has had to say today, but the people I get very fed up with are those from mobile phone companies, because they will quite often say that a person in a village such as Porth has 100% coverage when, actually, nobody in Hannah Street can get any signal whatsoever. Recently, when there was an arson attack on the mast, which covered several different companies, EE did not even bother to tell all its local customers that coverage would be out for four weeks and it refused to give compensation. The mobile phone companies simply must do better.

Nicky Morgan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question. Anybody would think that he was standing for election next week given how much he welcomed this announcement.

Nicky Morgan: We might all be doing so.

Nicky Morgan: That is very true.

The hon. Gentleman makes a very fair point, which is that honesty about the coverage being offered is very important. There is nothing more frustrating for people than being told that they have coverage—or it even looking like they have coverage on their phone—but they still cannot make a call. I am concerned to hear how EE handled that particular attack. I hope that Members right across the House will always know that, if they have problems such as that, they should contact me, the Ministers involved, or the Department so that we can follow it up on their behalf.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): How and when will my constituents in west Berkshire and Wokingham be able to get an advantage out of this excellent initiative? Will they need to do anything?

Nicky Morgan: No, they will not need to do anything. They will see the roll-out. Near, if not in, his constituency is, of course, a significant office of Vodafone, and we are grateful that it is part of these arrangements.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The Secretary of State said that we should be fair to those we represent, so, in that spirit, I ask her this. After one of my constituents on the Isle of Arran almost died owing to hot spots last year, the previous Secretary of State assured me that there would be 95% coverage in each of the four UK nations by 2022. We see today that that target has now slipped to 2025, and we know that Scotland’s 4G coverage will still be less than the UK-wide numbers, as the Secretary of State set out. Will she explain to the House, in the interests of my constituents, what has gone wrong with tackling hot spots so far in Scotland and when Scotland will have the same coverage as the rest of the UK?

Nicky Morgan: I would ask the hon. Lady also to raise that question with the Scottish Government. She is right to say that we want to get on with this and that matters of critical importance—even life and death—can rely on having a mobile phone signal, but we need to do this in the right way so that it actually works and provides reliable coverage. As I said in my statement, although 2025 is the target date, there are many areas where shared 4G coverage will be in place much sooner. There are difficulties in the more rural areas, which is why this is going to take slightly longer to roll out in some parts of the UK. I hope that we will have more details in time so that constituents can see where that coverage is going to be achieved in their area.

Mr Ian Liddell-Grainger (Bridgwater and West Somerset) (Con): First, until we change the rules in national parks, we are not going to achieve universal coverage. Secondly, Connecting Devon and Somerset has been a disaster. Will the Secretary of State please change what that project is doing? Until we do, the good burghers of Somerset and Devon are not going to get universal coverage.

Nicky Morgan: I will certainly look into the issue that my hon. Friend has raised in relation to the national parks, but of course there are always going to be challenges. It is not just about throwing money at the problem. It is also often about ensuring that the physical infrastructure is allowed to be erected.

With regard to Connecting Devon and Somerset, the digital and broadband Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), had a meeting with Members from the area. We know that there have been issues, and obviously the organisation is looking for alternative providers. My hon. Friend is talking about broadband connectivity, which is a slightly separate issue, but he is right because at the end of the day, constituents do not distinguish; they just want better connectivity all round.

Ben Lake (Ceredigion) (PC): A shared rural network is to be welcomed, as it could vastly improve coverage in Ceredigion. The Secretary of State will appreciate that rural communities will be eager to see swift progress on this proposal, so could she clarify whether recently constructed Home Office masts, in addition to any future emergency services network infrastructure, will be made available to this end where appropriate?

Nicky Morgan: My understanding is that the answer to that question is yes, but I will confirm that and let the hon. Gentleman have the full details.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): I welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement and decisive action on this matter. Coverage in rural areas is very dependent on the roll-out of the emergency services network, which is behind schedule and over budget. I understand that it is the preserve of the Home Office, not her Department, but will she use her best endeavours to ensure that this project is brought back on track?

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend very much indeed for his comments, and pay tribute to him for campaigning on this issue and encouraging other Members to work together to ensure that my Department was
rightly put under some pressure to make sure that we delivered on it. He will be interested to know that since I have taken over the Department we have been working very closely with the Home Office on the government concern about the emergency services network, but I accept his challenge, and the conversations with the Home Office will of course continue.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): East Lothian has been let down by Governments north and south of the border, who have ended the LEADER programme, as well as the Community Broadband Scotland and R100 funding. If it were not for East Lothian Council and local companies such as Lothian Broadband that have found imaginative solutions to this problem, East Lothian—its businesses, constituents and the children who are just trying to do their homework—would be in a desperate state. Between the Palace of Westminster and East Lothian, which will win the coverage war?

Nicky Morgan: I will leave the hon. Gentleman to have his fight with the Scottish Government, but he makes a good case about how slow some progress has been under their ownership. I pay tribute to those in rural, even residential, premises and need that connectivity to be fast and reliable, and not, as he says, to fade in and out. I hope he will welcome the fact that at the moment the coverage of all four operators is 78% in Northern Ireland, but once the shared rural network programme has taken effect, which we very much hope it will and as it is expected to, it will reach 91% of Northern Ireland.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): I regularly survey my constituents in Brigg and Goole and the Isle of Axholme on this and produce a network by network, geographically located report. EE has been very good in responding to those surveys. A new mast in Broughton will come online on 5 November as a result of that, and changes are also being made to a mast in Reedsness, so there is some good news. However, it is clear from my surveying of constituents that the maps provided by the networks do not have a great deal of reality compared with what my constituents are experiencing. May I urge the Secretary of State to look at that? Will she also look at local authorities offering up their facilities? One of my local authorities, North Lincolnshire Council, did that, but not a single one of the networks took it up on that offer.

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend makes a good point about maps. That is really important. Now that the mobile network operators are working together, it will hopefully be easier to get that information so that our constituents will be able to see the progress that is being made. He talks encouragingly about the two masts and the changes already happening in his constituency. In relation to local authorities, we are working with the Cabinet Office and having conversations to make sure that local authority infrastructure such as hospitals and schools can also be used to increase and improve connectivity in these communities.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Will the Secretary of State straightforwardly confirm that the deadline set out in her party’s 2017 manifesto will not now be achieved? Competition between mobile providers has been very fruitful for consumers over the past 20 years, particularly in reducing call charges. How will Ministers make sure that future fruitful competition will not be blunted by this collaboration?

Nicky Morgan: We are not nationalising the mobile network operators—they have come forward with a plan to work together, which is a very good sign. One of the key elements we will need to get this right and to follow the legal processes is to be compliant with competition law. The right hon. Gentleman invites me to say that earlier targets are not necessarily going to be met. Of course, we have not yet reached the end of this Parliament. Actually, I think that his constituents, like mine, are interested in what we are going to do rather than necessarily always looking at the numbers.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): This is very good news for Staffordshire. Even around the Lichfield area we have notspots. What consideration did my right
Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend for his welcome for this network. I am delighted that it is going to benefit Staffordshire and all parts of the United Kingdom. The mobile network operators have proposed, and we agree with them, that it will be much better for consumers because it will be much more consistent. The thing about roaming is that people get passed from network operator to network operator, so there is more risk of the signal falling out, whereas in this way they stay with their network operator as they travel across the United Kingdom, and therefore the signal is much more likely to remain consistent.

Chris Elmore (Ogmore) (Lab): My constituency runs along the M4 corridor, and I have been raising the specific issue of the south Wales valleys with the Secretary of State’s predecessors and previous digital Ministers for the three and a half years that I have been in this House. Large areas of my constituency have no coverage, and my valleys are blamed for that. Can she set out what specific support will be available for south Wales valley communities, and will she consider using areas such as the M4 to improve connectivity?

Nicky Morgan: I am happy to meet the hon. Gentleman, or the Under-Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport, my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), will be. Unfortunately, although I have many powers, moving mountains and valleys is not one of them—there is a limit to what I am able to do, but perhaps in due course, who knows? We would need to talk to the mobile network operators about their proposals in relation to the infrastructure needed for the future and for masts in particular. As I said in my statement, this proposal will deliver additional coverage to 16,000 km of roads, and I certainly hope that the M4 corridor will be one of those.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): This announcement is hugely welcome for the people of Lincolnshire, who are suffering from notspots.

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend. She might agree with them, that it will be much better for consumers if roaming were permitted, as it already is for 999 calls, this could be introduced so much quicker.

Nicky Morgan: I thank the hon. Gentleman for welcoming this announcement. I am sure that my private office will be listening with great interest to his request for a map and details of the coverage. That would be a good thing to provide, with as much detail as we can, so I will certainly ask the operators about that.

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): The shared rural network will be welcomed in East Hampshire, but what my constituents will most want to know is when they will see things improve in their area.

Nicky Morgan: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. He is right; this is about people being able to see improved coverage. That is why it is important that the mobile network operators conclude the binding legal agreement, so that we are able to map, have milestones for when the coverage will be delivered and understand exactly what infrastructure is needed and which operators need to share infrastructure more. I hope that he will play his part as the local MP by asking operators those questions, and we will certainly play our part in ensuring that they reveal that information to MPs.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I echo the wide welcome for my right hon. Friend’s announcement from those Government Members who represent rural constituencies, as well as from some Opposition Members, excluding those on the shadow Front Bench, who do not know what “rural” means. My right hon. Friend referred to the emergency services network and making massive improvements to coverage in the road network, which is excellent. Could she also encourage the operators to improve the signal on our rail network? Many of us are unable to work while travelling to and from this place by rail.

Nicky Morgan: I thank my right hon. Friend for that challenge. He is right; improving rail connectivity remains a significant ambition. I have spoken to the Secretary of State for Transport about that. There are some other challenges, but we are working out how we can do that. I am pleased to say that in the latest franchise, there was a greater requirement for on-board connectivity, and I hope that we will be able to see that throughout the network.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): I welcome this announcement. As my right hon. Friend knows, parts of Kent have worse coverage than Kabul. Will she tell me a bit about her 5G plans? I believe that there will be an announcement tomorrow about China’s possible involvement in our network. Does she agree that that poses a major danger to the Five Eyes community and that US sanctions against Huawei would leave us looking like we had just signed a long-term lease for business space with WeWork?

Nicky Morgan: I thank the Chair of the Foreign Affairs Committee. I am not able to say much about this for very obvious reasons. A decision will be announced in due course. I just want to say two things to the House. The first is that high-risk vendors have never been and
never will be in our most sensitive networks. The second is that the security and resilience of the UK’s telecoms network is of paramount importance. We will bear both of those things in our minds when making any decisions.

David Mundell (Dumfriesshire, Clydesdale and Tweeddale) (Con): As an MP for one of the largest constituencies in the UK with a large number of hotspots, I do welcome this announcement, but my right hon. Friend will be aware that many of the people who do not have a mobile service also do not have a broadband service. Given the abject failure of the SNP Scottish Government to deliver on any of their broadband targets, will she say today that those people who do not have broadband will be prioritised in the roll-out of this initiative?

Nicky Morgan: My right hon. Friend makes the very important point that connectivity is obviously of paramount importance. Having been driven through his constituency not long ago, when I had the experience of the signal dropping out, I know how important it is. He makes a good point about prioritisation, which I will discuss with the operators, but he makes an even better point about the fact that the Scottish Government, having promised much on broadband, have not so far delivered. I hope that people in his constituency and elsewhere will be mindful of that whenever they come to visit the polls.

Scott Mann (North Cornwall) (Con): This is obviously great news for my constituents in North Cornwall. The issue was highlighted back in 2014 when the then Prime Minister had to cut short a holiday because of a known hotspot that we have. It does not just affect tourism; it is also affecting business investment in the south-west. May I urge the Secretary of State to do all she can to avoid the two-tier system we have with urban and rural communities?

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend very much. I well remember visiting his constituency when he was seeking to be elected, and he has been a doughty champion for better connectivity across his part of Cornwall for many years since his election. He makes a really important point. One of the reasons why we are announcing this and why my right hon. Friend the Chancellor announced the £5 billion for rural broadband is that we want to make sure that our rural areas are absolutely not left behind and that the focus is not just on our urban areas. Both areas need to be better connected, and we need to do it at the same time.

Kirstene Hair (Angus) (Con): May I thank my right hon. Friend and the Prime Minister for the breakneck speed at which they have turned this around following my PMQ last Wednesday on this very subject? This is obviously very welcome news to my constituents and businesses and a real boost to the local economy, and it is great to see the UK Government working with the mobile providers. It is good news for everyone in Angus. Could she make it even better news by shortening the time the project will take to be completed?

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend asked a brilliant question at Prime Minister’s questions last week, and I am very pleased that we have been able to answer her request quite so quickly. She has asked another very good question today, and that is a real challenge. We will obviously have to see exactly how quickly the roll-out can happen, but she is a doughty champion for her constituency of Angus, and I will come back to her on exactly when it can expect to get that better connectivity.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): On Huawei, will the Secretary of State accept that we need debate prior to decisions being made? On this issue, will she explain how the £500 million will improve coverage on the Isle of Wight?

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend very much. I should just warn him and probably all right hon. and hon. Members that better connectivity may of course mean more emails and phone calls from those we seek to represent, which I know is something we will all relish. He is right about the planning system, and we absolutely will keep those feet to the fire. We are working very closely with colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to make sure those reforms can go through. We obviously need to have a consultation, but we also want to break through these barriers.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): May I welcome enthusiastically this announcement? It really beggars belief to listen to the negativity of the SNP. Given its lack of delivery in government in Scotland, SNP Members have a nerve to talk about our Government. Since Stirling is the third worst constituency in Scotland for mobile phone coverage, may I ask my right hon. Friend why it is right that my constituents should continue to have to pay the full rate of charge for a mobile service they do not enjoy?

Nicky Morgan: My hon. Friend has raised an important question about customer service. He is a doughty champion for Stirling, and he has brought the issue of better connectivity to my attention. I was happy to accept the challenge, and that is why I wanted to get this announcement out as soon as possible. I hope he will agree that this is a good day for connectivity in Scotland. Of course, Stirling is, I think, one of the first gigabit cities or first fibre cities, but we need to go further, and I know he will be at the heart of making sure that that happens.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I welcome the statement and my constituents in North Dorset will as well, probably with the caveat that it is about time. May I take my right hon. Friend back to the planning issue? Can she keep the planning team’s and Ministers’ toes to the fire on this? It is all well and good having the policies in place, and they do need updating, but their speedy implementation to get the right decisions to deliver the network is key, and local government has the key that unlocks it.

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend very much. I should just warn him and probably all right hon. and hon. Members that better connectivity may of course mean more emails and phone calls from those we seek to represent, which I know is something we will all relish. He is right about the planning system, and we absolutely will keep those feet to the fire. We are working very closely with colleagues in the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to make sure those reforms can go through. We obviously need to have a consultation, but we also want to break through these barriers.

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Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend very much indeed. I accept that lobbying request. He is right to say that there are always opportunities for funding bids. He is also right to point out—which he does as a champion for Dorset and his constituency—that with better connectivity comes the opportunity for more employment, more prosperity and more productivity. That is why this Government want to introduce better connectivity right the way across the United Kingdom.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): On behalf of the people of West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine—yet another vast rural Scottish constituency with its fair share of notspots—I enthusiastically welcome the announcement made today. Does my right hon. Friend agree that nobody should be punished or treated like a second-class citizen just by virtue of where they choose to live and work in our country?

Nicky Morgan: I thank my hon. Friend hard on behalf of the new unitary authority, Dorset Council, which has submitted bids for better rural connectivity? Can we please have the money, because we need it to create the jobs and prosperity that we desperately need?

Richard Drax (South Dorset) (Con): May I lobby my right hon. Friend hard on behalf of the new unitary authority, Dorset Council, which has submitted bids for better rural connectivity? Can we please have the money, because we need it to create the jobs and prosperity that we desperately need?

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con) rose—

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab) rose—

Mr Speaker: I will come to the hon. Gentleman. I am saving him up as a delectation of the House and a special taste.

Lucy Allan: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. We all come to this place to fight for our constituents. From the very first day, I have used every avenue afforded to me to fight to keep A&E and women and children’s services in Telford. I have had 25 parliamentary questions, six parliamentary debates, 15 meetings with Ministers and 29 letters. Is it in order for the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care to announce his decision on a six-year-long campaign of such importance to my constituents without meeting Telford’s elected representative to advise me of his decision, without notifying me by letter of his decision and without responding to multiple letters on the subject? Am I correct in my understanding, Mr Speaker, that all Ministers, as a matter of courtesy to the constituents we represent, have a duty to respond to and engage with Members on important constituency matters, no matter how junior the Member and no matter how important the Minister?

Mr Speaker: Well, I am certainly not suggesting that the hon. Lady is junior. She is now an experienced Member of the House. But in any case, in one very important respect—the most important respect—all Members in this place are equal: all Members have a responsibility to seek to advance the interests of their constituents. This is not, strictly speaking, a matter of order for the Chair. I am most grateful to her for ventilating her concerns and for her courtesy in giving me advance
notice of her intention to do so—as well as informing me that she has given notice to the Secretary of State—but I can certainly confirm that the way in which Ministers respond to hon. Members on important constituency matters should in no way be affected by length of service of the constituency Member. I am moderately surprised by this, because the right hon. Member for West Suffolk (Matt Hancock) is a very keen Minister and he has not suffered over the years from a deficit of ambition. I think that the right hon. Gentleman would be gravely concerned to have incurred the hon. Lady’s wrath. My hunch is that a letter of concern and possibly even of apology will be winging its way to the hon. Lady, accompanied by offers of cups of tea and urgent meetings, because of the solicitous concern of the Secretary of State for the hon. Lady’s constituents, and, possibly, for his own future wellbeing. We will leave it there for now. She has done a very sensible thing in raising it in the Chamber. I congratulate her on her foresight.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. There has been much discussion about whether a general election will or will not take place in the near future. I am concerned that any general election campaign might cover the Remembrance weekend. It is enormously important to many people to pay our respects to those who gave the ultimate sacrifice and to veterans, families and others. Can you give some guidance on the position we can take, as an MP or as someone standing to become an MP, in laying wreaths on that day?

Mr Speaker: I think the safest answer to that question—I appreciate the hon. Gentleman’s concern—is that it would very much be a matter for local determination. There is, of course, a difference between a sitting Member and a selected or re-selected candidate for Parliament. How that matter is treated in individual constituencies will, I think, rather depend on those organising the services. My advice to the hon. Gentleman is that, with the beatific smile for which he is renowned in all parts of the House and appropriate courtesy at local level, he should make inquiries and he may find satisfaction.

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. That is an important point. It is in your gift I believe, Mr Speaker, to determine whether Members, or perhaps former Members in the case of an election, are allowed to use the Portcullis wreaths. Could you determine that for us, please?

Mr Speaker: I will certainly take advice on it—I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman—and if, having taken advice, I have something to report to him and to the House, I will.

Early Parliamentary General Election

5.14 pm

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): I beg to move, That there shall be an early parliamentary general election.

I think it is fair to say that nobody in this House relishes the idea of a general election, because nobody wants to put the public to this inconvenience—[ Interruption. ]—particularly, as one hon. Gentleman says, during this season. But across the country, there is a widespread view that this Parliament has run its course, and that is because I simply do not believe that this House is capable of delivering on the priorities of the people, whether that means Brexit or anything else.

Of course, I would rather get Brexit done. I share the blazing urgency of many colleagues across the House. Indeed, last Tuesday, we briefly allowed hope to bloom in our hearts when, for the first time in three and a half years, Parliament voted for a deal to take this country out of the EU, and I repeat my admiration for the way MPs came together across the House to do that. In many ways, it was an astonishing moment. They said that we would never reopen the withdrawal agreement. They said that we would never be able to get rid of the backstop. They said we would never do a new deal with the EU. We did all of them. They said we would never get Parliament to agree.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for all he is doing to get Brexit done. In his preparations for a no-deal Brexit, can he make sure that there is plenty of corn feed for the election chickens on the Opposition Benches?

The Prime Minister: Elegantly put, and thanks to the work of the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, our preparations for a no-deal Brexit are very thorough indeed. But alas, as I have said, we have not been able to get Parliament to agree. There was a tantalising moment when I thought that Parliament was going to do the sensible thing, and then this House threw out the programme motion, at the urgings of the Opposition, at the final hurdle, as they intended all along. They made it inevitable that the people of this country would be retained in the EU against their will for at least another three months, at a cost of another £1 billion a month. [ Interruption. ] I hear cries from those on the Opposition Benches to bring the Bill back. I have offered that and I continue to offer it. I wanted, and I still want so badly, to accommodate this House.

Those of us on the Government Benches have compromised. Last week, I wrote to the Leader of the Opposition offering him more time for debate—days more in Committee, days more in the Lords, the ability to sit round the clock if necessary, and all last weekend—with only one condition: that he would agree to do what all Leaders of the Opposition are meant to yearn, crave and campaign for and have a general election on 12 December. I offered him that chance and I offer it again today. [ Interruption. ] He turned us down on Thursday and Friday. I offer again today to use all the hours God gives to scrutinise this Bill, provided that that scrutiny concludes in time for an election on 12 December.
Let us be clear: that is enough time to scrutinise this Bill. It was a remarkable feature of the debate last week on the new deal that not only were there no new ideas in that debate, but the Opposition actually ran out of speakers in the debate. [Interruption.] They want more time—they ran out of speakers. The people of this country can see the reality. They are not interested in scrutinising Brexit. They are not interested in debating Brexit. They just want to delay Brexit and cancel Brexit. If the House is to convince the country that it is serious about getting Brexit done, there must be a fixed term to this debate—a parliamentary terminus, a hard stop—that everybody can believe in.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): To make this matter easier for those of us on the DUP Benches, could the Prime Minister confirm to the House whether, if he is successful and achieves a general election, he will seek a mandate on the basis of the withdrawal agreement that the House voted for last week, or whether he will seek to change that withdrawal agreement?

The Prime Minister: I can tell the House that we have an excellent deal for the whole of the UK and that we will campaign on the basis of that deal. If the hon. Gentleman wants more time to debate and scrutinise it, as I take it from his question he does, he can have it, but we must have 12 December as a hard stop, a parliamentary terminus, that everybody can believe in.

An election would fulfil exactly that purpose. It would allow a new Parliament and a new Government to be in place by Christmas. Without that hard stop of an election, without that moment of truth, the electorate believe it is time that we all, each and every one of us in this House, had the courage finally to face our ultimate represent—and a Labour Opposition who would turn the Prime Minister who cannot be trusted. Having illegally prorogued Parliament for five weeks for his Queen’s Speech, he now read, is in favour of an election. The Liberal Democrats are in favour of an election. What an incredible state of affairs. There is one party tonight that is actually against a general election. There is one party that does not trust the people of this country, and that is the principal party of opposition. I hope that the Leader of the Opposition accepts tonight that he is snookered and that this charade has gone on for long enough, and that he will agree to allow Brexit to get done and then allow us to make our cases to the people.

When that election comes, the people of this country will have to make a choice between a Government who deliver, a Government who not only got a great Brexit deal when others said it was impossible but who are putting 20,000 more police on the streets, delivering the biggest hospital building programme in a generation, investing £14 billion more in our schools and levelling up education funding across the country—a great one-nation Conservative Government, which is what we represent—and a Labour Opposition who would turn the year 2020 into a toxic, tedious torture of two more referendums, one on the EU and one on Scotland. That is the choice.

It is time for the Leader of the Opposition to move his rusty Trabant from the yellow box junction where it is currently blocking progress, and it is time for us to get Brexit done by 12 December and then go to the people. It is now overwhelmingly clear that the only way to get Brexit done is to go to the people of this country, and I believe it is time that we all, each and every one of us in this House, had the courage finally to face our ultimate bosses, the people of this country.

I commend the motion to the House.

5.26 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): This is a Prime Minister who cannot be trusted. Having illegally prorogued Parliament for five weeks for his Queen’s Speech, he now abandons that Queen’s Speech. He got his deal through on Second Reading, then abandoned it. He promised us a Budget on 6 November, and then he abandoned that too. He said he would never ask for an extension, and he said he would rather die in a ditch—another broken promise! Every promise this Prime Minister makes, he abandons. He said he would take us out of the European Union by 31 October—[Interruption.]
Mr Speaker: Order. Let us have some measure of decorum in the debate.

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister said he would take us out of the European Union by 31 October, do or die.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Jeremy Corbyn: No.

The Prime Minister spent £100 million—£100 million—on an advertising campaign to leave on 31 October, but failed to deliver. This is serious, Mr Speaker. The National Audit Office says that the campaign “failed to resonate”. I ask the Prime Minister, and I ask this House: with that £100 million, how many nurses could have been hired, how many parcels could have been funded at food banks, how many social care packages could have been funded for our elderly? The Prime Minister has failed because he has chosen to fail, and now he seeks to blame Parliament. That is £100 million of misspent public money.

At the weekend, we learned from the former Chancellor that the Prime Minister’s deal was offered to the former Prime Minister 18 months ago, but she rejected it as being not good enough for the United Kingdom. We have a rejected and recycled deal that has been misrepresented by Ministers in this House, no doubt inadvertently. The Prime Minister said, in terms, there would be no checks on goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland; the Brexit Secretary himself has confirmed that there will be. The Prime Minister made promises to Labour Members about workers’ rights; I remember his saying, with all the concentration he could muster, that workers’ rights would be protected by him. The leak to the Financial Times on Saturday shows these promises simply cannot be trusted. He says the NHS is off the table for any trade deal, yet a majority of the British public do not trust him. And why should they? Thanks to a Channel 4 “Dispatches” programme we learn that secret meetings have taken place between UK Government officials and representatives of US pharmaceutical firms at which the price of national health service drugs has been discussed.

We have a Prime Minister who will say anything and do anything to get his way. He will avoid his responsibilities and break his promises to dodge scrutiny. And today he wants an election and his Bill. Well, not with our endorsement. He says he wants an election on 12 December. How can we trust him to stick to that date when we do not yet have legal confirmation of the extension? The Prime Minister has not formally accepted, and the other 27 have not confirmed following that acceptance. The reason I am so cautious is quite simply that I do not trust the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am afraid that the Leader of the Opposition is mistaken. As I have always said, this Government obey the law. We have complied with the law, and that has taken its course. Parliament asked for this delay, and now it is up to the right hon. Gentleman to go to the country in a general election. That is what he should do.

Mr Speaker: For the avoidance of doubt, such matters are not matters for the Chair, but the Prime Minister has made his own point, apparently to his own satisfaction.

Jeremy Corbyn: I simply say this to the Prime Minister: if he always obeys the law, why was he found guilty by the Supreme Court?

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. On the issue of—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not care how long it takes—I am not having the hon. Gentleman shouted down and prevented from being heard. That will not work. End of subject.

Stephen Doughty: On the issue of trust, which my right hon. Friend is rightly pointing out, is he aware of the interesting rumour that has reached my ears that the Prime Minister might be planning not to stand in his own constituency at an upcoming general election, and that he has apparently instead lined up Sevenoaks or East Yorkshire? Has my right hon. Friend heard that rumour?

Jeremy Corbyn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. I would put nothing past the Prime Minister. All I know is that we have an excellent Labour candidate in Uxbridge.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), I do not trust the Prime Minister, but there is a deeper issue about whether we can trust him with our safety. Let me briefly read this analysis from the Financial Times, which says—[Interruption.] The Prime Minister may shake his head, but perhaps he would care to listen. It states that when “Johnson responded, ‘I have never heard such humbug’”—[Interruption.]

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I understand that the annunciation may not have been working in the offices of Labour MPs, because most of them have not chosen to turn up today. Can that be investigated?

Mr Speaker: It does not need to be investigated at all. Unfortunately, it is not even a very good try at a bogus point of order; as the smile on the face of the hon. Gentleman readily testifies, it is a very substandard attempt.

Jeremy Corbyn: I think this section is very important, so I will go through it again. Thanks to a Channel 4 “Dispatches” programme we learn that secret meetings have taken place between UK Government officials and representatives of US pharmaceutical firms at which the price of national health service drugs has been discussed.

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Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Jeremy Corbyn: No.

The Prime Minister spent £100 million—£100 million—on an advertising campaign to leave on 31 October, but failed to deliver. This is serious, Mr Speaker. The National Audit Office says that the campaign “failed to resonate”. I ask the Prime Minister, and I ask this House: with that £100 million, how many nurses could have been hired, how many parcels could have been funded at food banks, how many social care packages could have been funded for our elderly? The Prime Minister has failed because he has chosen to fail, and now he seeks to blame Parliament. That is £100 million of misspent public money.

At the weekend, we learned from the former Chancellor that the Prime Minister’s deal was offered to the former Prime Minister 18 months ago, but she rejected it as being not good enough for the United Kingdom. We have a rejected and recycled deal that has been misrepresented by Ministers in this House, no doubt inadvertently. The Prime Minister said, in terms, there would be no checks on goods between Great Britain and Northern Ireland; the Brexit Secretary himself has confirmed that there will be. The Prime Minister made promises to Labour Members about workers’ rights; I remember his saying, with all the concentration he could muster, that workers’ rights would be protected by him. The leak to the Financial Times on Saturday shows these promises simply cannot be trusted. He says the NHS is off the table for any trade deal, yet a majority of the British public do not trust him. And why should they? Thanks to a Channel 4 “Dispatches” programme—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Let us have some measure of decorum in the debate.

Jeremy Corbyn: As I was saying, thanks to a Channel 4 “Dispatches” programme we learn that secret meetings—[Interruption.]

Conservative Members might find this funny, but actually it is quite serious for our national health service.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I understand that the annunciation may not have been working in the offices of Labour MPs, because most of them have not chosen to turn up today. Can that be investigated?

Mr Speaker: It does not need to be investigated at all. Unfortunately, it is not even a very good try at a bogus point of order; as the smile on the face of the hon. Gentleman readily testifies, it is a very substandard attempt.

Jeremy Corbyn: I think this section is very important, so I will go through it again. Thanks to a Channel 4 “Dispatches” programme we learn that secret meetings have taken place between UK Government officials and representatives of US pharmaceutical firms at which the price of national health service drugs has been discussed.

We have a Prime Minister who will say anything and do anything to get his way. He will avoid his responsibilities and break his promises to dodge scrutiny. And today he wants an election and his Bill. Well, not with our endorsement. He says he wants an election on 12 December. How can we trust him to stick to that date when we do not yet have legal confirmation of the extension? The Prime Minister has not formally accepted, and the other 27 have not confirmed following that acceptance. The reason I am so cautious is quite simply that I do not trust the Prime Minister.

The Prime Minister: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I am afraid that the Leader of the Opposition is mistaken. As I have always said, this Government obey the law. We have complied with the law, and that has taken its course. Parliament asked for this delay, and now it is up to the right hon. Gentleman to go to the country in a general election. That is what he should do.

Mr Speaker: For the avoidance of doubt, such matters are not matters for the Chair, but the Prime Minister has made his own point, apparently to his own satisfaction.

Jeremy Corbyn: I simply say this to the Prime Minister: if he always obeys the law, why was he found guilty by the Supreme Court?

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. On the issue of—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I do not care how long it takes—I am not having the hon. Gentleman shouted down and prevented from being heard. That will not work. End of subject.

Stephen Doughty: On the issue of trust, which my right hon. Friend is rightly pointing out, is he aware of the interesting rumour that has reached my ears that the Prime Minister might be planning not to stand in his own constituency at an upcoming general election, and that he has apparently instead lined up Sevenoaks or East Yorkshire? Has my right hon. Friend heard that rumour?

Jeremy Corbyn: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention. I would put nothing past the Prime Minister. All I know is that we have an excellent Labour candidate in Uxbridge.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Like my hon. Friend the Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty), I do not trust the Prime Minister, but there is a deeper issue about whether we can trust him with our safety. Let me briefly read this analysis from the Financial Times, which says—[Interruption.] The Prime Minister may shake his head, but perhaps he would care to listen. It states that when “Johnson responded, ‘I have never heard such humbug’”—[Interruption.]
Mr Speaker: Order. I invite the hon. Lady to resume her seat. She has a right to be heard. She has a right not to be shouted down by Front or Back Benchers, and she will not be.

Paula Sherriff: Thank you, Mr Speaker. The analysis states that when

“Johnson responded: ‘I have never heard such humbug in all my life’, Labour MP Paula Sherriff began receiving toxic tweets at a rate of more than 100 an hour...One such tweet from that evening read: ‘Tough shit Mrs Shrek. A #SurrenderBill or #SurrenderAct is exactly what Benn's treacherous act is.’ Another read: ‘Do what the people told you to effing do otherwise yes expect to be strung up metaphorically or physically.’”

The Prime Minister has never apologised for saying what he said that evening, so how can we trust him that we can be safe?

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and for the stoic way in which she has dealt with the most appalling abuse that has been thrown at her. After the threats that she and other colleagues have received, the damage that has been done to MPs’ offices and the abusive language that has happened in so many parts of this country, I would be happy to give way to the Prime Minister now if he wants to get up and apologise to my hon. Friend for what he said about her during that debate. Mr Speaker, the Prime Minister has an opportunity to apologise for the language he used, but he seems unable to do so. The treatment she received was disgusting by any standards. I would also point out that numbers—

The Prime Minister: I will happily apologise if, for instance, the shadow Chancellor will apologise for inviting the population to lynch the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions.

Jeremy Corbyn: Well, sorry seems to be the hardest word, doesn’t it?

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that we have a Prime Minister who has a tortuous and difficult relationship with veracity? My right hon. Friend is therefore absolutely right not to believe a single word that comes out of that man’s mouth?

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. She is right. That is why many of us are very cautious about believing anything that the Prime Minister says. We want this tied down before we agree to anything.

A 12 December election would be less than a fortnight before Christmas and nine days before the shortest day of the year. The House must consider that it will be dark before 4 pm in parts of the country, that many students will have just finished their term and gone home for Christmas—[Interruption.] Well, actually, people having the right to vote is what an election is all about, and people risk being disenfranchised.

Alan Brown (Kilmarnock and Loudoun) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way. Going back to workers’ rights, he correctly says that the Prime Minister cannot be trusted, so will he explain why the 19 Labour Back Benchers who said that they had secured workers’ rights concessions from the Prime Minister backed the withdrawal agreement? If the Prime Minister is so incompetent, is there any point at which the right hon. Gentleman is not going to keep him in power?

Jeremy Corbyn: The Prime Minister claimed he would defend workers’ rights, but all the information in the Financial Times at the weekend suggests that he will not do that at all.

I was talking about students and their opportunity to vote on the date in question, but the latter point may not be the case on 9 December, and we will consider carefully any proposed legislation that locks in the date. The theme here is that we do not trust the Prime Minister. We want something that definitely and definitively takes no deal off the table and ensures that the voting rights of all our citizens are protected.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): I am very grateful to the Leader of the Opposition for giving way. If we take him at his word that this most untrustworthy Government and Prime Minister are wedded to doing the most evil and disastrous things to this country, can he explain his reticence about a general election at which he has the chance to sweep us out of office?

Jeremy Corbyn: We have said all along that we want no deal off the table. As there is so little trust in this Prime Minister, we will agree to nothing until exactly what is being proposed is clear and concrete. We agree that an early election is necessary, but we seek good reason for one, as no general election has been held in December since 1923.

The Prime Minister has a Bill to deliver and a Budget to present. He has a Queen’s Speech that he told us was vital. He should, for once in his life, stick to his word and deliver. He says in his misogynistic way that people should “man up”, which is a bit rich for a Prime Minister who refuses to face up to his responsibilities at every turn and serially breaks his promises.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. Does he agree that the timing of this proposed general election, not whether we have a general election, is yet another example of the art of voter suppression, ensuring that students are not likely to have a vote and that older people and people with disabilities are less likely to go out and vote? If the Prime Minister truly believed in democracy, we would hold the election when people are able to go and cast their vote.

Jeremy Corbyn: When no deal is off the table, when the date for an election can be fixed in law, and when we can ensure that students are not being disenfranchised, we will back an election so that this country can get the Government it needs. It needs a Government that will end the underfunding and privatisation of our public services, tackle the grotesque poverty and inequality in our country created by this Government and the Government before it, recognise the seriousness of the climate emergency, rebuild an economy that does not just work for the privileged few, which is all the Tory party knows about, and build a better society that ends inequality and injustice and gives the next generation real opportunities and real hope about the kind of country and kind of world that they can live in.
5.44 pm

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): This Parliament is once again misjudging the mood of the public. We were elected here to do serious things on behalf of our public. Conservative and Labour MPs alike were elected to see Brexit through. Three years and four months later, there is no sign of that. Instead, we have this discordant, argumentative Parliament that will do nothing. It will not throw the Government out of office and it will not allow the Government to govern. We owe it to the British people either to allow our Government to govern or to let the British people decide on a better group of MPs who can form a Government and do positive things for our country.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Every constituency in my region voted at the 2016 referendum by a huge margin to leave the European Union. At that time, lots of my constituents, in some of the most deprived communities of this country, told me that they did not trust this Parliament to deliver it. They said, “We won’t get it. They’ll never let us leave.” The five Conservatives out of the 10 MPs in my region might have voted to deliver Brexit, but is not the truth of it that the Labour MPs across my region, bar one or two examples, are never going to vote to leave the European Union, sadly proving right my constituents who said, “They’ll never let us leave”?

John Redwood: My hon. Friend is right, but it is now about more than Brexit. It is about confidence in our parliamentary system to deliver orderly government that can do things for the people or to allow the public to decide who should be a better Government, because the House has no confidence in the Government.

This Parliament needs to put through a Budget quite soon. Our economy needs a boost, and we need to know whether we can have the tax cuts as well as the spending increases, but I suspect that the Government fear bringing a Budget to the House because they think there will be no co-operation as they do not have a majority and this Parliament will not allow a majority to be formed.

This Government have recently brought a Queen’s Speech to the House. It contains a number of good measures that I do not think were ideological or Conservative provocations to socialists and those of a more left-wing nature. They were chosen to build some consensus and address the issues that worry people. But again, I think the Government rightly fear that any one of those measures, if introduced, would probably meet with resistance and a lack of co-operation, in exactly the way that we have been experiencing with all these other measures.

But above all, this House needs to think what message it is sending to all our partners, friends and allies—countries around the world; the businesses that our businesses do business with; all those contacts we have around the globe. They see this country as a great beacon of democracy—a country of great experience in the art of democratic government; a country that has often led the world in putting forward and fighting for those freedoms and showing how they can improve the lives of those governed by them. But instead we are sending a message that we do not know what we are doing and can never agree about anything—that all we can do is have endless rows in this place, for the entertainment of people here perhaps, but to the denigration of our country and the undermining of its position.

How can a Government conduct international negotiations when everything they propose is undermined or voted against by the Opposition, because we do not have a majority? Above all, how have we got to the point where this House decides that it is good legislation to say that the Prime Minister has to break his promises—where it has turned the demand that he break his promises into something that this House calls an Act of Parliament? No wonder we look ridiculous. No wonder we cannot resolve Brexit. No wonder we cannot have a Budget to promote our economy. No wonder we cannot govern with aplomb in the interests of the British people.

The Prime Minister is right that if this House cannot do better, it must dissolve and ask the people to choose a better Parliament. Either we need to be a better Parliament or they need to choose a better Parliament as soon as possible.

5.49 pm

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): May I begin by thanking the European Union for granting the extension that this Parliament asked for under the Benn Act? We are not leaving Europe on 31 October, as the Prime Minister told the Conservative party and the United Kingdom we would be. The Conservative party and the Prime Minister have been defeated once again. A general election on the terms offered by the Prime Minister is not and will not ever be acceptable to the Scottish National party, but doing nothing is not an option. The impasse cannot remain forever. We on these Benches do want an election, but not with the hand that the Prime Minister is delivering. Let us be clear about what he promises: he proposes to bring back his bad withdrawal deal; he knows that some Labour MPs will help him pass that Bill and then he would have us leave the EU at the end of November before a general election. For Scotland, that would mean we would be taken out of the EU against our will, and we will never vote for such a proposition. It would give the Prime Minister a post-Brexit election, something we simply will not sign up to.

At the weekend, I and the leader of the Liberal Democrats wrote to Donald Tusk seeking a meaningful extension to article 50 that would remove the risk of no deal and give us time. The continuation of the fletxension, whereby the UK can leave at the end of any month in which it passes the motion, is not the complete safety and security we want. It demonstrates precisely why if we enable this motion to pass, we will be out before the Prime Minister’s election. We cannot allow this Prime Minister to railroad through this disastrous so-called “deal”: a deal that opens the door to a hard Brexit, with us outside the single market and the customs union; and a deal that would end freedom of movement, seeing Scotland’s working population decline—that is what the Conservatives offer the people of Scotland.

The people of Scotland have made their position very clear, because we voted 62% to remain in the EU. Where is the respect to the people of Scotland and to our Parliament? This is, after all, a deal that leaves Scotland at a disadvantage to Northern Ireland and a deal that will not have the consent of the Scottish Parliament.
Let me tell the Prime Minister that that consent is required, despite what he said at Prime Minister’s questions last week. There must be respect towards the Scottish Parliament. This deal will cost each person in Scotland the equivalent of £1,600 compared with EU membership—or even more if no trade agreement can be reached.

So today, Scottish National party Members will not be supporting the Prime Minister in his motion. We will not be bullied by this Prime Minister. We will not play his games. And we know what he does not want: to face the electorate having missed his 31 October deadline. He has not delivered Brexit, and the people know he has failed. In his own words, it is time for the PM to look for the nearest ditch.

We will support the Liberal Democrat proposal for an election before Brexit can happen, with no reintroduction of the withdrawal agreement Bill, because given the way some Labour MPs voted, we cannot trust Labour to block the Bill in future. This is not an issue of three days between election dates; it is an issue of whether we are in the European Union or out of it. That is fundamental. We are ready for an election, but it must be on those terms, not—not ever—on the Prime Minister’s. In that election, we want to see votes for 16 and 17-year-olds and for EU nationals. When that election comes, we will fight the Tories on Brexit, on the rape clause, on austerity, on the harm they have done to people’s lives and livelihoods, and, yes, we will fight them on the right of Scotland to choose our own future, rather than be dragged through this Westminster mess ever again.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Does that mean that if the Prime Minister were to introduce a one-line Bill tomorrow, for example, in order to engineer a general election, the right hon. Gentleman would not be supporting that proposition?

Ian Blackford: I say to the Labour party that we and the Liberal Democrats have put forward a Bill that leaves us in control of the process and allows us to set the date for the election, and I appeal to Labour MPs to come with us, because this is about leadership. This is about the Opposition parties coming together and taking the keys of No.10 Downing Street away from a Prime Minister we cannot trust. My message to the Labour party is: let us face an election, let us do it on our terms, let us make sure that we take the Prime Minister and his toxic Tory Government out of office. We can do it—we can do it if the Opposition parties unite. We can stop the deal that the Prime Minister wants to drive through. It is in the hands of the Labour party to join us and the Liberal Democrats, to have the courage to stand up against the Prime Minister. But what are we going to find? We are going to find that the Labour party wants to sit on its hands and wait for this Government to deliver a Brexit. I say to the Labour party: do not be the handmaidens of the Prime Minister’s Brexit. Let us put this back to the people now by coming together. It used to be said, including by Oliver Brown, a well-known Scottish nationalist, “A shiver ran along the Labour Front Bench looking for a spine to crawl up.” The shiver is still looking for that spine.

The SNP is standing up for Scotland. We are standing up against Brexit and this Tory Government. The SNP has fought tirelessly alongside others in this House to prevent Brexit, to secure the right to revoke article 50, to stop no deal and to limit the damage. We have delivered the votes, day in and day out. But we have to be realistic and we have to be honest with the public: we have repeatedly voted for a referendum with remain on the ballot paper but, regrettably, there is no evidence that the majority exists in this House for a people’s vote. The Leader of the Opposition and the shadow Chancellor are acutely aware that if the Bill comes back, some of their MPs will back it, the Bill will become law and Brexit will happen. The question for the Labour party is: can it get its act together? Do Labour Members actually want to stop this Prime Minister? Do they want to stop Brexit or do they agree that it should be imposed on Scotland against our will? Doing nothing means that this Prime Minister stays in power—it means he gets his game. And we know what he does not want: to face the electorate having missed his 31 October deadline. He has not delivered Brexit, and the people know he has failed. In his own words, it is time for the Prime Minister to look for the nearest ditch.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I would like the right hon. Gentleman to clarify something he said earlier. He talked up his link-up with the Liberal Democrats on wanting to have an election on a different date in December. He went on to say that that would be conditional on 16-year-olds and European Union citizens having ballot papers. I wish to ask him a simple question: if there is no time to do that, does he still back the idea of an election in early December?

Ian Blackford: I would simply say that it is the right thing to do; our young people have a right to have a say on their future, just as EU nationals do. That is the principled position that we have long taken, and I am proud that my colleagues in government in Scotland have made sure that when it comes to our Scottish election, our young people and our EU citizens are given their rights. We want to see this happen here, but I understand the circumstances we are in, where we need to make sure that an election happens on our terms. That is the priority. It is the priority to make sure that we legislate that in future our young people and our EU nationals are given due respect, but the priority we face in the short term is to make sure that we come together to stop this damaging Brexit that the Prime Minister wants to put through.

Stephen Doughty: I listened carefully to what the right hon. Gentleman said about 16 and 17-year-olds. I certainly would bring an amendment such as that to any Bill and I would be interested to hear what he says, because this is what we now have the pleasure of having in Wales. He also mentioned EU voters, but does he agree that there is also an issue in respect of overseas voters, many of whom were excluded in previous elections? Does he also agree that crucial issues relating to spending and social security would need to be addressed before we could be clear that any election could proceed safely and democratically?

Ian Blackford: The hon. Gentleman raises issues that have been aired in this House and that he knows we support him on, but the fact of the matter is that we are in a constitutional crisis.

I ask the House to reflect on one thing. We have been granted an extension by the European Union until the end of January. It behoves us all to end this crisis. Time is of the essence. If we act now, in all our national interests,
without playing the games that the Conservatives want, we can have that election and put the issue back to the people.

I certainly want the people in Scotland to have their say—and, crucially, to recognise that if we want to protect our interests in Scotland that means we should not and cannot be ripped out of the European Union against our will. That means that Scotland has to complete the journey that we began with devolution 20 years ago and become an independent member of the European Union.

In conclusion—[Interruption.] Well, there we are. There is the message to the people of Scotland: “Sit down and shut up!” That is what we get from the Conservatives. That was absolutely loud and clear, and it comes over time and time again. I tell you this: people at home are watching this and they can see the disrespect that is shown. The day when this Union comes to an end is fast approaching.

The SNP will never—not ever—vote for Brexit. We cannot and will not trust this Prime Minister. The Scottish National party does not want to leave this Prime Minister with time in Parliament to do anything other than dissolve it, so we will not vote with the Government tonight. But make no mistake: the Scottish National party is ready to give people back their say, to stop this Tory Government, to stop Brexit and to demand the right to choose Scotland’s future as an independent country—our destiny.

6.1 pm

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): The situation is very simple, and the bottom line is this. The Labour party is scared—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman, who is Chair of the European Scrutiny Committee and has served without interruption in this House for the last 35 years, must—and will—be heard.

Sir William Cash: The bottom line is this. I heard the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) talking about disrespect just now, and I heard the Leader of the Opposition talk about trust. What those who are abstaining or voting against the motion are doing is utterly disrespectful to our own constituents and utterly disrespectful to our democratic system. They are not trusting the people, they are not removing the uncertainty and they are not allowing the British people their democratic right to choose Members of Parliament whom they wish to elect in individual constituencies.

What the Leader of the Opposition and the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber are doing is utterly disrespectful to our democratic system. They are not trusting the people, they are not removing the uncertainty and they are not allowing the British people their democratic right to choose Members of Parliament whom they wish to elect in individual constituencies.

What the Leader of the Opposition and the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber are doing is denying democracy. That is completely and totally unacceptable, whether people are remainers or leavers. The democratic right of the British people is to have a general election in the situation we are in now. Yes, certainly we should be supporting leaving the European Union, but remainers, too, have the right to vote, and that is being denied them by the Leader of the Opposition and every single Labour Member of Parliament and others who are either abstaining or voting against the motion today. That is a total denial of democracy. When it comes to the general election, I trust that the people who know why they have been denied it will vote against those Members of Parliament, to make sure that those Members themselves see the damage they have done to our democratic system.

6.4 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The Liberal Democrats want to stop Brexit. I appreciate that there are different views on different sides of the House on that matter, but I hope that people appreciate that at least we have been consistent on wanting to stop Brexit throughout this process.

Several hon. Members rose—

Jo Swinson: I will make some progress and then give way.

We believe that the best way to do this is to put a specific Brexit deal to the public for a final say in a people’s vote. We have been leading the campaign for a people’s vote for three and a half years. We stood in the 2017 election on a manifesto that argued for a people’s vote 17 times in this House, including an amendment to the Queen’s Speech last week.

The official Opposition have refused to back wholeheartedly a people’s vote—in fact, 19 Labour MPs voted for the Prime Minister’s deal last week. When it comes to the cause of remaining in the EU and of stopping Brexit, the Labour party has not delivered. We have put our best efforts in, but so far the House has not yet backed them in sufficient numbers.

Kevin Brennan: Not all the hon. Lady’s MPs have always been so unequivocal on this: the hon. Member for Streatham (Chuka Umunna) voted in favour of article 50, although he never tells the House that. I voted against it.

Why does the hon. Lady believe that a general election, using an electoral system that her party, like me, has always thought does not deliver a fair result, will solve this issue, rather than sticking to the point that we should be seeking a referendum? She could end up delivering a hard Brexit on only 38% of the vote, not 51%.

Jo Swinson: I always welcome any converts to the cause of electoral reform.

Kevin Brennan: I’m not a convert!

Jo Swinson: Or indeed long-standing supporters.

We are looking for the best way to protect our constituents and our place in the European Union. But MPs should not kid themselves that, by hanging on, there is somehow going to be a different outcome.

Lisa Forbes (Peterborough) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Jo Swinson: I am responding to the previous question. The reality of the situation is this. We have secured an extension to article 50 until 31 January. It was not automatic, not guaranteed and not given by return of email. It was deliberated and agonised over by our EU friends, and certain members of the EU were pushing very hard for there to be a very short extension of article 50. They said very clearly that there needed to be a clear purpose for article 50. If the House of Commons
made it clear that the purpose would be to have a people’s vote, I would be delighted. We have been campaigning for that for three and a half years. This afternoon, I tabled an early-day motion calling again for a people’s vote. If MPs really want to demonstrate that the numbers are now there, go to the Table Office and sign it, but do not give me wishful thinking that the numbers are there when the real risk is that we could crash out on 31 January instead of 31 October. That is no better.

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): If the election goes ahead and the hon. Lady is successful in stopping Brexit, would she share government with the Leader of the Opposition? I do not see how else it would work.

Jo Swinson: I have been very clear that I do not believe that the Leader of the Opposition or the Prime Minister are the right people to be in government and leading the country. I am crystal clear about that. In a general election, I will go to the country and make my case that there should be a Liberal Democrat Government. A Liberal Democrat Government would revoke article 50 on day one, and that is the best way to stop Brexit. We need to find a way forward. If it is not through a people’s vote—if there is not the support for that in this Parliament—we need to look at the other way to do that, and right now, that is through a general election.

Anna Soubry (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Ind): If the right hon. Member for Kingston and Surbiton (Sir Edward Davey), who has not attended those meetings, has obviously not been informed. Does the hon. Lady understand that the Government push ahead with their withdrawal Bill and it is delivered, and Brexit is delivered on the back of Labour votes, or that we end up in January, a couple of weeks away from the deadline of crashing out without a deal, in the same precarious position, but that time the EU says, “I am sorry, but we have extended and extended again and we cannot keep doing so if you do not find a path to resolve this.”

Charlie Elphicke (Dover) (Con) rose—
Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) rose—
Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (Ind) rose—
Jo Swinson: I will not give way. I want to make some progress.

That is why, in the absence of those numbers for a people’s vote, the way forward now is to have an election, but to do so responsibly, not letting the Prime Minister force through his bad Brexit deal in a small number of days without proper scrutiny, which is what his plan is and why we will not support his motion tonight. We know that the Prime Minister’s Brexit deal will be bad for workers’ rights, bad for environmental protections, bad for the economy, bad for jobs, bad for our public services, bad for our security and bad for our United Kingdom. It should not be left to the Government to have carte blanche to set the date of the election after the House of Commons has dissolved. We cannot trust what the Prime Minister says.

Gareth Snell (Stoke-on-Trent Central) (Lab/Co-op): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Jo Swinson: No, I am making some progress.

We cannot trust what the Prime Minister says. We have no guarantee that he would not try to crash us out of the European Union. He said that he would not prorogue Parliament; he did. He said that he would not send a letter to request an extension of article 50, and he did. We cannot trust what the Prime Minister says. That is why the plan that we have put forward with the Scottish National party for a general election on 9 December takes no deal off the table with the extension to article 50 and means that we have no withdrawal agreement Bill and that there is no wriggle room on the date for the Prime Minister. We have worked together on a cross-party basis. We do not agree on everything, but we do agree that we want to stop Brexit. We have worked together, which has been important. The European Union did not grant that extension on Friday when it said it might, and our EU friends have told us that the letter and the Bill that were published were instrumental in making sure that they were able to grant that extension.

Stephen Doughty: The hon. Lady set out three conditions, which I noted very clearly. The leader of the SNP mentioned the issue of 16 and 17-year-olds getting the vote in such a situation. He also mentioned EU electors, overseas voters and a number of other issues. Does she support efforts to ensure that those things are attached to any election, and would she support a Bill that did not a guarantee that those rights to vote were respected and available?

Jo Swinson: I thank my hon. Friend—and I do count him as a friend—for that intervention. We have also worked together well on the people’s vote campaign,
and I welcome the cross-party nature of that work. I have campaigned for votes at 16 from the moment that I came into this House. We have votes at 16 for most elections in Scotland, and it works well. The sky has not fallen in. I think that votes at 16 should be introduced across all different elections. But I say to my hon. Friend that the worst thing we could do for 16 and 17-year-olds is to crash out and leave the European Union. We are in a situation where there is no guarantee of an extension beyond 31 January, and we need to do everything that we can to stop Brexit. If that means having an election to stop Brexit to protect the rights of those 16 and 17-year-olds, we need to deliver that, because leaving the European Union is the thing that will wreck the future of those young people.

Gareth Snell: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Jo Swinson: I have given way plenty of times.

The Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition say that they want a general election. If that is the case and they are not just playing games, then the Government will give time for the Bill that we have published, and the Leader of the Opposition will ask his MPs to support it. I relish the opportunity to take both of them on in a general election and share with the country the Liberal Democrat positive vision to stop Brexit and build a brighter future.

6.16 pm

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): I am delighted to make a short contribution to this very important debate. I shall be supporting the motion tonight, because it is absolutely clear to me that the only way out of the current situation is a general election. This House is in stalemate. We are in lockdown. We cannot move forward with Brexit; we cannot move forward with anything else. That is not good for the country. It is not good for the businesses in our country, which are fed up with the uncertainty and the challenges that they are facing and want to know what the way forward is. The current state of this House is not good for our democracy.

It is also essential that we have an election as soon possible because, in the eyes of many voters across the country, this House has lost all legitimacy to sit. It has lost the trust that was invested in it by the British people in 2017. Let me start with the Liberal Democrats. I note what the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson) said about an election manifesto for a second referendum. The Liberal Democrats have only half a passing acquaintance with keeping manifesto promises, but at least half of their members currently sitting in this House were elected on a manifesto to respect the referendum and deliver Brexit, and they have switched parties without any reference to their constituents. Their constituents voted for an MP to represent them as a member of a party to deliver Brexit, and those constituents have had no say—they have not been consulted—about their MPs’ change of position.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Does my hon. Friend share my concern that many young people were duped on tuition fees? The horse-trading then went on in coalition. There was no straight answer about who the Liberal Democrats would prop up in the next coalition.

They are milking that 16 and 17-year-old vote because they are promising a future that they do not necessarily intend to deliver—just as they never delivered on tuition fees. They traded them away.

Steve Double: I am very grateful for that intervention. I agree with my hon. Friend wholeheartedly. I do not believe that the Liberal Democrats have always held the position of wanting a second referendum, because I distinctly remember, after the referendum in 2016, Liberal Democrat after Liberal Democrat coming on the media and saying, “We must respect the outcome of the referendum. We must deliver this outcome.” I do not believe that a second referendum has always been their position.

Just under 600 Members were elected in 2017, on a clear commitment to respect the referendum and deliver Brexit. It is a sad reflection on our democracy and on the politics in this country today that, as we sit tonight, as far as I can make out, only about 300 Members are committed to that end. Over half the MPs who were elected to deliver on the referendum have reneged on that promise since the 2017 general election. This House no longer reflects what people voted for in 2017. People voted for something they thought they were going to get, and as things stand right now, they are not getting what they voted for.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): My hon. Friend is talking about the sad state of democracy in our country. When we go around the world and say, “The United Kingdom stands for respecting democracy and the rule of law,” other countries say, “Well, you had a referendum where the majority of the people wanted to leave, and your Parliament will not deliver on that.” It is quite clear that not being able to deliver on that result weakens our position in pushing for democracy around the world.

Steve Double: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, about which I know he has a great deal of experience and knowledge. The eyes of the world are looking on this place to see whether we will be true to what we said we would do and whether we will respect what the voters told us to do.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): My hon. Friend talks about Members of Parliament being elected at the last election on a promise of delivering Brexit and reneging on that promise. Did he notice that 217 Labour MPs voted against the withdrawal agreement Bill on Second Reading? Had they voted for it, they could have amended it how they wished, but they actually voted to stop Brexit.

Steve Double: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. If the Leader of the Opposition wants to take no deal off the table, there are two very simple ways to do that: vote for a deal and secure a smooth exit from the European Union; or vote for a general election and take no deal off the table if he wins. The fact that he will not support a general election betrays the real reason that Labour Members will not support an election, which is that they are afraid of the British people, they are afraid of what voters will vote, and they are afraid that they will lose seats and we will be in government.
I will be supporting this motion tonight because I believe that this House has sadly lost all legitimacy. We have lost the trust of the British people, and the only way to recover it is for the House to be dissolved as soon as possible, to have an election and to let the British people elect a Parliament they can trust to represent them.

6.22 pm

**Sammy Wilson** (East Antrim) (DUP): The Prime Minister has claimed that anyone who does not support his demand for an early election is, first, trying to stop Brexit, and, secondly, running scared of the electorate. The Democratic Unionist party will not be supporting this motion tonight, but not because we are scared of the electorate. In fact, I can tell the House that the Unionist electorate in Northern Ireland are so angry at, so despairing of, and so bewildered by the way in which the Prime Minister has broken his promises to the people of Northern Ireland that they would return 100 DUP MPs if they had the option.

We are not scared of a general election and we are not trying to stop Brexit. In fact, we have been pilloried in this House because we have been seen to be some of the most determined people to deliver Brexit. But the Brexit on offer is not a Brexit for the United Kingdom; it is a Brexit for part of the United Kingdom. It would leave Northern Ireland still within the single market and under the EU customs code. It would mean that any goods coming into Northern Ireland from GB would be subject to customs checks, customs declarations and tariffs. It would mean that we would have to sign export declarations when we sent goods to another part of our own country.

All these things would add costs and delays to the economy of Northern Ireland and would be a huge imposition on the thousands of small firms that currently trade freely with the rest of the United Kingdom. They would suddenly find themselves having to treat the country to which they belong as a third country when it comes to trade. Despite what the Prime Minister has said, the agreement makes it quite clear that we could not take part in trade deals that our country does with other parts of the world if they went against the protocols in the agreement.

**Emma Little Pengelly** (Belfast South) (DUP): The issue of additional bureaucracy for business between Northern Ireland and Great Britain, and Great Britain and Northern Ireland, is all the more stark when we look at the statistics, which show that Northern Ireland trades more with Great Britain than with the Republic of Ireland, the European Union and the rest of the world put together; putting up a barrier to our biggest market by far would be hugely significant for the economy of Northern Ireland. Does my right hon. Friend agree?

**Sammy Wilson:** My hon. Friend is right, but sometimes statistics can go over people’s heads. Let us also bear in mind that the agreement goes totally against the promises made by both the former Prime Minister and the current Prime Minister—that there would be no impediments to trade between our part of the United Kingdom and GB, and that there would be no danger of the Union being imperilled.

**Mr Kenneth Clarke** (Rushcliffe) (Ind): Would the right hon. Gentleman accept that this dreadful border down the Irish sea would be avoided if the whole United Kingdom left the customs union and left the single market, which I think his party has always supported? But now that the Prime Minister has gone back on and abandoned that position, would the DUP be prepared to accept the entire United Kingdom staying in the customs union and the single market during the transition period, leaving the whole thing to be negotiated over the next two or three years during that transition period? That would rescue Ulster from the absurd proposal of putting these barriers between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom.

**Sammy Wilson:** Of course the right hon. and learned Gentleman will know that that is only half the answer, because under this agreement we would still be within the rules of the single market, still subject to the European Court of Justice making judications about whether we adhere to those rules, and still subject to the EU being able to deny the United Kingdom Government the ability to apply changes to the law made here in Westminster to Northern Ireland.

There are very good reasons why we oppose this deal, and the motion does not offer any hope of change. In fact, if anything, the Prime Minister is quite openly saying, “And, by the way, I now want Democratic Unionist party MPs to vote for the accelerated passage of the Bill”—a Bill that would facilitate the agreement, which would have such detrimental effects on Northern Ireland. We do not want the accelerated passage of the Bill. We do not want 24-hour scrutiny. We want to ensure that nothing happens in this House that enables the Prime Minister to deliver on a deal that he promised he would never, ever do.

Of course, if the Prime Minister gets his general election, what platform will he be standing on? What mandate will he seek? What strategy will he put forward? What will be in his manifesto—that he wants to come back here with a majority to deliver the death deal to the Union in Northern Ireland, as he made clear to my hon. Friend the Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley)?

The offer of the accelerated passage of a Bill that would facilitate the agreement and an election that the Prime Minister would use to justify breaking his promises to the people of Northern Ireland is an offer that we can refuse and will be quite happy to refuse.

Although we want to see Brexit delivered, we want to see it delivered for the whole United Kingdom. We want it delivered in the form that the Prime Minister twice—he changed his mind the third time—voted for in this House. We will not be prepared to facilitate him moving the goalposts and affecting Northern Ireland in this way. Although we do not fear a general election and we want to see Brexit delivered, if it is not going to be delivered for the whole United Kingdom, I do not think that anyone in this House could possibly condemn us for standing up for our constituents, who will be damaged economically and constitutionally.

**Stephen Pound** (Ealing North) (Lab): May I put it to the right hon. Gentleman that if we were to have a general election, the opposition would simply be a de facto referendum on part 2, because there would be no other subject under debate during that general election than Brexit? Would it not be an absolute dereliction of duty were we to
allow something as important as a general election to be hijacked and simply to be a weak, ersatz version of another referendum?

Sammy Wilson: The hon. Gentleman is trying to draw me into saying that this should be decided by a second referendum. I do not believe that it should be decided by a second referendum, because, of course, the first referendum has not been delivered on. We want to see the first referendum delivered on, and delivered on for the whole United Kingdom.

The argument has been put forward here tonight that we need a general election because this has now become a zombie Parliament—the Government cannot get their business through. We are not wreckers. We do not want to see the United Kingdom ungovernable. Indeed, the reason we voted with the Government on the Queen’s Speech last week was that they had a programme to get through and we wanted to give it support. We do not want to see the United Kingdom made ungovernable. But the one thing we are not prepared to do is to see the United Kingdom divided and the Union destroyed, and that is why we cannot give our support in the vote tonight.

John Redwood: Would it be a way through if the Government went to Brussels now and said that they would like to initiate free trade talks immediately so that we could leave with no tariffs and new barriers, if such talks were agreed to, rather than signing the withdrawal agreement?

Sammy Wilson: We are wandering a bit from the motion now, Mr Speaker, but I hope you will indulge me just to answer this point. That is one of the arguments that the Prime Minister has put forward—that surely all this will just disappear if and when we have a free trade arrangement. But the withdrawal agreement makes it very clear in section 13(8) that—that would have to be agreed with the EU so it would have a veto; so much for the claim that we have got our sovereignty back—the EU could still have a free trade arrangement that would leave Northern Ireland fully or partly within the protocols in the agreement.

While I would love to think that that would be a way out, and we would love to see it be a way out, unfortunately the agreement that the Prime Minister has signed does not allow it to be a way out. That is yet another reason why we have to get this right, and yet another reason why we do not believe that debating, scrutinising and accelerating the passage of the Bill through the House, and an early general election to get a mandate to implement it, is correct.

6.32 pm

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): We find ourselves in Alice in Wonderland politics today. I am in my 28th year in Parliament, and I have never seen anything as incredible as the events I have seen since the British people voted in 2016 to leave the European Union. We made that contract with them. Project Fear did not quite work and they were not quite scared enough to vote to remain in the EU. Actually, they said, “No, we’ve heard what everybody has said is going to happen—that the sky will fall in—but we are still prepared to vote to leave the European Union.” In many cases, they simply did not believe some of the scare stories they were told.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that it is not just people who voted to leave, but people like me who voted to remain, who want this done?

Mr Evans: Absolutely. I did a two-day tour around my constituency last Friday and Saturday, and I spoke to a number of people. There were three hardcore remainers who would do almost anything to remain in the European Union. However, the vast majority of people who come up to me in Ribble Valley say either, “I voted leave: get on with it”—they are quite angry that we have not left the European Union—or, “I voted remain, but I can’t believe that we are still in the European Union. I am a democrat. I believe in democracy, and when we have a referendum I believe in carrying out the wishes of that referendum.” We all remember what was written on the back of that pamphlet: it said that we would follow the instructions of the British people in that referendum.

Even better than that, of course, we had a general election in 2017 in which we said that we would deliver Brexit. Labour Members stood in that general election and said they would deliver Brexit, but what do we find? Ever since that general election, we have seen dither and delay, dither and delay, and anything—anything—but vote for the Brexit that they promised. It was either, “It’s not the right deal”, or “We have to get no deal taken off the table.” Well, we had an opportunity last week to take no deal off the table, and that would have made it possible for Labour Members to have fulfilled their promise in that general election two years ago by voting for the deal that the Prime Minister brought back from Brussels. But no—the vast majority of Labour MPs voted against Second Reading. That meant that they did not want it to go any further. There was no possibility of their amending the legislation to have a customs union, to get workers’ rights or to get higher environmental standards. No, they decided they wanted to stop Brexit in its tracks, and that is why they voted against Second Reading. Only 19 of them voted to give it a Second Reading.

My constituency, Ribble Valley, is in the heart of Lancashire. In fact, on an Ordnance Survey map one of my villages is actually in the very centre of the United Kingdom. My constituency voted 57% to leave the European Union. Every constituency in Lancashire, whether it has a Labour MP or a Conservative MP—thankfully, we do not have any Lib Dems—voted to leave the European Union.

What we are seeing tonight is quite remarkable. Labour Members said that they would deliver Brexit, and they are now clearly not doing that. Then they said that they wanted more time to scrutinise the withdrawal agreement Bill, even though the vast majority of them voted against its going any further. They wanted more time, and so tonight we are offering them more time. Then they said that they wanted an early general election. Well, the way they get an early general election is by voting for the motion tonight. They will get more time to scrutinise the withdrawal agreement Bill so that they will at least fulfil part of their promise two years ago, and then get their early general election on 12 December whereby they can put forward the programme that they wish, and see where the people go.
On the other hand, we have the Scots Nats, who are at least saying that they want to go for 9 December. They do not want to deliver Brexit—they never have—but none the less they are being consistent on that. We hear time and again that Scotland voted not to leave the European Union. More than 1 million Scots voted to leave the European Union. There is no reaching out to those 1 million Scots. More people voted to leave the European Union in Scotland than voted for the Scottish National party, so we see where that is going.

Then there are the Lib Dems, who just want to revoke article 50. They are called the Liberal Democrats. I do not know what aspect of them is democratic, because we had a referendum, the people said they wanted to leave, and that is not being fulfilled.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): As I understand it, the leader of the Liberal Democrats said that if we had a second referendum, she might not agree with its result. I wonder whether that is true.

Mr Evans: That was a previous position. However, we are in an even more bizarre position with Labour Members, because they say that if they win the election they will go to Brussels, renegotiate Brexit, then put that to the British people in a second referendum and campaign against the deal they just negotiated. That is the most Alice in Wonderland politics that I have seen in 28 years. Now we have an Opposition, who have been calling for an early general election, running scared. The last thing they want to do is face the electorate, and, quite frankly, I can see why.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (IGC): We are apparently approaching the season of good will, when we are supposed to have Christmas parties in our primary schools and wish each other season’s greetings. I hope that people who want a season of good will have not been watching these exchanges.

They say that turkeys do not vote for an early Christmas. That is probably true, but it is also apparent that some people have been on chicken runs from one constituency to another. [Interruption.] No, I am standing in Ilford South; I am not running anywhere. I am standing in my own constituency.

Kevin Brennan: I respect the hon. Gentleman. Was he referring to former members of the Independent Group for Change when he talked about those who were on chicken runs from one constituency to another?

Mike Gapes: The people who are doing it and who perhaps will do it know who they are; I will not name them.

The only way we are going to end this rancorous, divisive politics is by being realistic. If there is a general election and a party gets a big majority—35% or 40% of the vote—that will still leave a majority in this country extremely unhappy with the outcome. The referendum, in my view, was misguided. It was an advisory referendum, but former Prime Minister David Cameron nevertheless said that it would be binding. He then made his reckless gamble and ran away, leaving his successors to clear up the mess. That referendum got us into the mess. The only way we will get closure in this country is by putting the withdrawal agreement to a confirmatory vote by the people and legislating for the referendum to be legally binding, and unambiguously so.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Is it not somewhat ironic that we are now being offered the third general election since the referendum, with no sight of a confirmatory referendum?

Mike Gapes: Absolutely.

There is a dire need for us to think about the long-term consequences. If 16 and 17-year-olds are not allowed to vote, that generation will be extremely unhappy for many years to come. We also need to look at the role of social media. The Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee has highlighted the problems with social media’s involvement in election campaigning. If there is an election in a few weeks’ time, it will not be properly regulated and will be open to abuse.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): I was going to raise that very point. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that we need new legislation on data and electoral law, to ensure that any future election is not interfered with by people committing criminal offences?

Mike Gapes: I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on raising that. He has done a fantastic job in highlighting that issue in the House, and I wish him well for the future.
Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Mr Kenneth Clarke: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. We have just had an hour and a half of a slightly out-of-control student union debate, and it sounds as though we might have a rather similar farcical performance tomorrow. Is there any chance of you, as the Chair of the House, persuading the usual channels to resume their meetings and produce a sensible timetable for the Bill we have before us, so that this House can resume discussion of these serious matters in a grown-up fashion and come to a resolution on the deal, which—I repeat—I will vote for if it reaches Third Reading, as I think it will? It could well be that we get back to orderly government, which I think the general public are dearly wishing we would rapidly do.

Mr Speaker: I take careful note of what the Father of the House has said, and I am certainly open to any such discussions, but it does require willing participants, and it remains to be seen, with the passage of time, whether that be so. But I think everybody will be attentive—on this occasion, as on every other—to what, on the basis of 49 years’ experience in the House, the Father of the House has had to say to us.

Jeremy Corbyn: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I apologise to you and to the Prime Minister for not being here at the point when he raised his point of order. I was detained outside the Chamber; I am now back here.

I understand that a Bill will be tabled tomorrow. We will obviously look at and scrutinise that Bill. We look forward to a clear, definitive decision that no deal is absolutely off the table and there is no danger of this Prime Minister not sticking to his word—because he has some form on these matters—and taking this country out of the EU without any deal whatever, knowing the damage it will do to jobs and industries all across this country.

Mr Speaker: That point stands in its own right.

Stephen Doughty: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As you know, I believe in correcting things when I get things wrong, and I want to apologise to the right hon. Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight)—a very
honourable gentleman—for incorrectly referencing his seat in the point I made earlier. I understand that he has in fact been readopted by his association. I apologise to him for mistaking his seat for another. For that, I truly apologise.

Mr Speaker: That was typically gracious of the hon. Gentleman.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con) rose—

Mr Speaker: I have a sense that his apology will be accepted readily. Let us hear a response in the form of a point of order from Sir Gregory Knight.

Sir Greg Knight: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I accept the very gracious comments just made.

Mr Speaker: I am greatly obliged, as the hon. Gentleman will be, to the right hon. Gentleman.

Environment Bill


Second Reading

Mr Speaker: Before I invite the—it says here the Minister, but this is no mere Minister—the Secretary of State herself to move the Second Reading, I must announce my decision on certification for the purposes of Standing Order No. 83J (Certification of bills etc. as relating exclusively to England or England and Wales and being within devolved legislative competence), with which I am sure colleagues are keenly familiar. On the basis of material put before me, I certify that, in my opinion, clauses 1 to 18, 23, 52, 78, 84 and 88 to 121 of the Environment Bill and schedules 15 to 19 to the Bill relate exclusively to England on matters within devolved legislative competence, as defined in Standing Order No. 83J; and—I know colleagues are keenly hanging upon this—clauses 56, 61, 63, 65, 73 to 75, 77 and 86 of the Environment Bill and schedule 11 to the Bill relate exclusively to England and Wales on matters within devolved legislative competence, as defined in Standing Order No. 83J.

7.7 pm

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Theresa Villiers): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

This is a Government who recognise the profound importance of the great environmental challenges of our time. We are the first Government to set the goal that this generation should leave the natural environment in a better state than it was bequeathed to us. This is the first Government to make a legally binding commitment to become a net zero carbon economy. We have cut greenhouse gas emissions by 25% since we returned to office, while growing the economy at the same time. We have pledged more funds than ever before to help the developing world reverse the decline of nature and tackle climate change. We are determined to respond to the grave public concern about these threats, so a new Cabinet Committee will co-ordinate work on climate change across Government, under the chairmanship of the Prime Minister.

Our action is guided by the mounting scientific evidence of the inextricable link between climate and nature. Wildlife habitats are crucial carbon storage systems. Protecting those forests, peatlands and natural open spaces is vital if we are to have any chance of averting disastrous climate change.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. Will she confirm that it is Government policy that green belt land should be built on only in extenuating circumstances? The proposals to build on the green belt in Radcliffe, Unsworth and Simister in my constituency will devastate entire green belt areas and completely destroy the character of the village of Simister. Does she agree that that is not acceptable in any community?
Theresa Villiers: I agree that it is vital that we protect our green belt and that green belt rules are abided by. The Government are absolutely determined to defend the green belt as part of our environmental policy.

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend. This is a very welcome Bill, which builds on much good work that the Government have already done. Does she recognise, however, that in suburban parts of London, like hers and mine, there remains a concern about particulate pollution? Will she consider, as the Bill progresses, what more we can do to strengthen the fight against particulate pollution—for example, by seeking to strengthen our commitment by joining the World Health Organisation guidelines on particulate pollution by 2030?

Theresa Villiers: My hon. Friend will be aware that clause 2 sets out the ambition to set a legally binding target on fine particulate pollution, responding to exactly the concerns of his constituents—and indeed of mine in Chipping Barnet.

John Redwood (Wokingham) (Con): Planting more trees would make a great contribution to a more beautiful environment and have other good consequences. Will my right hon. Friend say a little about how that can be done, and can some of them come to Wokingham, please?

Theresa Villiers: The Government have been involved in planting about 15 million trees, but we are determined to expand the programme because trees are crucial storage mechanisms for carbon and we will never get to net zero unless we plant a lot more.

Bill Wiggin (North Herefordshire) (Con): My constituents, who, like me, care about nature, are absolutely delighted with the Bill. I am thrilled to be able to support it, particularly for rural communities blighted by fly-tipping. However, will my right hon. Friend watch out for the water abstraction element? It seems uncharacteristically mean.

Theresa Villiers: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his praise for the determination expressed in the Bill to protect nature and reverse the decline in biodiversity. We will listen carefully to his concerns and those of his constituents with regard to water abstraction to ensure that the Bill’s provisions are implemented in a way that is sensible, proportionate and fair.

Adam Afriyie (Windsor) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. Windsor is a beautiful constituency with a lot of active people campaigning on the environment. One of our biggest bugbears is Heathrow airport and any expansion of it. Will she confirm that the Bill contains measures on fine particulates that could well have an impact on Heathrow’s ability to expand?

Theresa Villiers: It will certainly be vital for the expansion programme at Heathrow, if it goes ahead, to comply with the exacting environmental requirements that have already been placed on it. Naturally enough, it will also have to comply with any new requirements introduced to meet the target on fine particulate pollution, to which we are committed.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): We have all received briefs from the Countryside Alliance and various other countryside bodies. They are very clear that the countryside is a place of great beauty and a habitat for wildlife. It is also a place of work and is home to millions of people. Will the Government ensure that the farming community, who own the land, look after the land and have managed it for years, will continue to do so, and that any new legislation will not disadvantage them?

Theresa Villiers: We believe we can support farmers in their environmental stewardship and in caring for our natural environment through our replacement for the common agricultural policy. That will allow us to go further and faster in providing support for farmers conducting their crucially important role in protecting our natural environment.

Vernon Coaker (Gedling) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for giving way. For everybody’s constituents, including mine in Gedling, the Bill is very important. It contains a lot of very welcome measures. If we are to have an election in the next few weeks, will she look at what can be done to preserve those measures so that they are not lost? I know that that is a matter of process, but it is extremely important to all of us and our constituents.

Theresa Villiers: I agree that this landmark proposed legislation needs to continue regardless of when Parliament dissolves for a general election. It is vital that the Bill comes back to the House as soon as possible to ensure that we can embed in legislation the important protections it contains.

Several hon. Members rose—

Theresa Villiers: I will take one more intervention and then I will make some progress.

Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): I am very grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way. I was encouraged by her answer on Heathrow. She and I were on the same side of this argument for many years. I wondered whether we still agree. In 2017, she said, “this is a hugely expensive project and one that will create significant economic damage.” Her constituents and my constituents agree. Does she still agree with those words today?

Theresa Villiers: As the hon. Lady points out, my reservations about the Heathrow expansion are on the record for everyone to read. The fact is that the House has voted by a large majority to give outline planning permission to this project. It is now for the scheme’s promoters to demonstrate that they can come up with a scheme that meets the exacting conditions on the environment that Parliament has set.

Chris Grayling (Epsom and Ewell) (Con): I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for allowing me to intervene. Like many Members, I am one of a team of species champions, each representing an individual species that is in some way endangered. Does she agree it is very important that, as we tackle the housing challenge, we ensure developers build houses and create estates in a way that is sustainable for the surrounding countryside and allows those who move into such areas to live side
of people who wish to speak means that speeches will
be limited to between three and four minutes. If people
intervene and take more time during the Secretary of
State’s speech, that time limit will go down significantly.

Theresa Villiers: I will take a point of information
from the hon. Member for Westminster North (Ms Buck).

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): I thank
the Secretary of State very much. On air quality, will
she join me in congratulating the Mayor of London on
the success of the ultra low emission zone, which has
seen such a dramatic fall in polluting vehicles moving
into inner London? Is she also conscious of the fact that
83% of reporting zones across the country are still in
breach of air pollution limits? However much she tells
us that the Government will be doing better, does she
recognise just how scandalously short we have fallen in
recent years? We have very serious doubts about what
the Government are—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. We cannot have this,
because the hon. Lady has just spoken for half as long
as most people who wait here till 10 o’clock will get.

Theresa Villiers: I will take the hint and make progress,
Madam Deputy Speaker, but I reassure the hon. Member
for Westminster North that we have made significant
advances in cleaning up air quality across the country.
There are still significant issues with roadside exceedances.
There is more that we need to do and that is why the Bill
will set out those demanding targets.

Several hon. Members rose—

Theresa Villiers: No, I will make some progress.

I want to highlight clause 2, which contains one of
the most ambitious elements of the legislation: namely,
the duty to set a legally binding target for PM2.5 fine
particulate matter. As Members will be aware, this
pollutant has the most significant impact on human
health. Poor air quality is the biggest environmental
threat to public health. It is shortening lives and causing
illness, and this Government are determined to step up
our efforts to clean up the air that we breathe—an issue
that I know concerns my constituents in Chipping
Barnet, and I am sure that that view is shared by many
across our nation.

Steve Brine (Winchester) (Ind): Many of our constituents
will be so relieved to hear the House discussing a
positive piece of legislation. As a former public health
Minister, I know that our clean air strategy was described
by the WHO as an

“example for the rest of the world to follow.”

Will the Secretary of State say a word about how the
Bill will enable and help local government to meet their
responsibilities in improving air quality across the country?

Theresa Villiers: My hon. Friend is absolutely right:
we will not be able to succeed in our ambition to clean up
our air quality without strong action by local government.
There are important provisions in the Bill to help local
government to address air quality challenges, for example,
in relation to domestic burning.
Several hon. Members rose—

Theresa Villiers: For the sake of Back Benchers’ speeches later on, I will have to make some progress. Just as this nation acted successfully to curb the air pollution dangers of the past, we now need to address this major environmental harm that we face in the modern era.

Clauses 19 to 38 will establish the Office for Environmental Protection as a powerful new independent watchdog on the environment. It will provide expert independent advice to Government on environmental plans; scrutinise policy and progress; investigate if public authorities fail to live up to their commitments on the environment; and, where necessary, take enforcement action. The OEP will have a role in enforcing climate change law as well, complementing the functions of the much respected Committee on Climate Change. This addition to the Bill was one for which both the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and the Environmental Audit Committee called. As a non-departmental public body, the OEP will be independent of ministerial control. It will have a free-to-use complaints system for the public, and multi-year funding settlements will give it financial stability.

The second half of the Bill will empower environmental improvement across a range of sectors, encouraging businesses to innovate and invest in meeting the crucial environmental challenges that we face as a nation, and creating additional powers for local government on waste, nature, air quality and water. I think everyone in the House would agree that we need greater efficiency in the way we treat resources and waste. Our constituents are fed up with litter and fly-tipping and appalled by plastic pollution. This legislation will help us to crack down on the blight of waste crime and fly-tipping that costs the taxpayer over £600 million every year. It contains a powerful new set of measures to tackle plastic waste.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend agree that making the producers responsible for the plastic that they make will drive a step change in ensuring that products are no longer just chucked away, but are made to last and be repaired and recycled, bringing an end to this plastic pollution nightmare?

Theresa Villiers: My hon. Friend is absolutely right that the extended producer responsibility provisions in the Bill will help to deliver the results for which she is calling.

Our “Future of the Sea” report estimates that 12 million tonnes of plastic are currently entering the ocean and that that could treble by 2025. Our constituents are demanding change. We must act to address the shocking levels of plastic in the marine environment, and the Bill will make it easier to reuse and recycle so that we build a more circular economy at home to conserve and better use our precious natural resources.

Clause 49 grants the power to set up a deposit return scheme for products such as drinks containers. Clause 50 enables the plastic bag charge to be extended to other items—the charge has seen bag use drop by 90% since its introduction. We believe that these provisions will be widely welcomed by many who want concerted action to tackle the tragedy of plastics pollution. The suite of measures on plastics in the Bill is further strengthened by powers to make those who produce plastic packaging pay for its whole lifetime cost, including disposal. This will incentivise a switch to more sustainable forms of packaging and, crucially, provide an income stream to fund improvements to the way we tackle waste and recycling. Stronger standards for a wide range of products and clearer labelling will enable consumers to identify more sustainable products. A consistent set of materials will be collected from every household and business to help us all to recycle more, and the Bill also includes measures to encourage businesses to waste less food and help to ensure that surpluses reach those who need them.

Giles Watling (Clacton) (Con): I am a very old-fashioned man, and I come from an age when we mended things if they broke. I hope that my right hon. Friend agrees that the Bill will encourage people to go back to the days when we actually fixed things rather than threw them away at the end of use.

Theresa Villiers: That is one of the outcomes that we hope the Bill will help to deliver.

As well as wide-ranging plans on plastics, the Bill has at its heart an extensive package to protect nature. The net gain provisions in schedule 15 will make a 10% boost for biodiversity a compulsory part of plans for new development. I believe that this will generate tens of millions for investment in nature and give more people better access to green space.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am quite sure that the right hon. Lady, as a former Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, will be deeply concerned that we have no functioning Assembly and have not had one for almost three years. If we do not have the Assembly restored in the forthcoming weeks, will she commit to extending much more of this—I use her word—“landmark” Environment Bill to Northern Ireland? Many people in Northern Ireland would be very pleased if she could make that commitment.

Theresa Villiers: I cannot give that commitment today, but we work very closely with the Northern Ireland civil service, and the hon. Lady will be aware that many provisions in the Bill are ready to apply to Northern Ireland; for the moment, they need Ministers to switch them on. We will continue to keep the question of governance under review, and I would love to see many more of these measures extended to Northern Ireland, but we have to respect the constitutional settlement.

Several hon. Members rose—

Theresa Villiers: No, I am going to make some progress.

The Government have already strengthened the protections for ancient woodlands, veteran trees and irreplaceable habitats, and the Bill helps us to go further. Schedule 16 will help to combat illegal deforestation. We are also legislating to give communities a say when local authorities plan to remove treasured trees from urban and suburban streets.

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): On the subject of engaging communities, will the Secretary of State take note of a recent report from the Environmental Audit Committee, on which I sit, on invasive species which
calls for an army of volunteers across this country to help identify invasive species so we can help to eradicate them?

Theresa Villiers: I agree that volunteers getting involved in the fight against invasive species is very productive. There is an example in my own constituency, where a group is helping to remove invasive species from Pymmes Brook.

The Bill will strengthen and improve the duty on public authorities to make sure that the way they carry out their functions both conserves and enhances biodiversity and enables landowners to enter voluntary conservation covenants with responsible bodies, such as charities, that would bind subsequent owners of the land to sustainable stewardship long into the future. It also provides an important statutory underpinning for the nature recovery network we outlined in our 25-year plan—for example, by mandating the creation of local nature recovery strategies to map nature-rich habitats.

Steve Double (St Austell and Newquay) (Con): As chair of the all-party group on ocean conservation, I want to thank the Secretary of State on behalf of all of us who care about our seas for the measures in the Bill to reduce plastic waste. We also welcome the additional powers to hold water companies to account. Can she confirm that these extra powers will help to reduce the number of sewer overflows during heavy rain and hold water companies to account if they fail to reduce and eventually eradicate them?

Theresa Villiers: My hon. Friend is right that the Bill contains measures that will make it easier to maintain the pressure on water companies to do more to combat pollution. We want them to do better when it comes to tackling these completely unacceptable instances of sewer overflows and pollution.

Several hon. Members rose—

Theresa Villiers: No, I am going to wind up now. Clean, safe and abundant water for all is a fundamental focus of this Bill. The provisions in part 5 will improve the way companies operate to meet current and future demand, help to ensure improved, long-term water resources, help with wastewater planning and enable more resilient solutions to drought and flooding.

In conclusion, just as the Bill seeks to put nature and climate at the heart of government decision making, so the Government are placing these environmental goals at the heart of our efforts to relieve poverty around the world. We are doubling our international climate finance at the heart of our efforts to relieve poverty around the world. We are doubling our international climate finance, helping to ensure improved, long-term water resources, help with wastewater planning and enable more resilient solutions to drought and flooding.

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Antoinette Sandbach (Eddisbury) (Ind): I would be grateful if the hon. Lady could confirm that she welcomes the ambition in the Bill to be the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than it inherited, but does she also agree that that means the Bill should reflect a non-regression principle—in other words, that our environmental standards should not fall below what we currently have?

Sue Hayman: The hon. Lady makes an important point. I shall come to non-regression later.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The hon. Lady is making a powerful case. The Secretary of State talked a lot about how the Bill would put in place a long-term vision. Does she share my concern about what it says about biodiversity net gain? It says that the net gain sites are guaranteed for only 30 years. They could be ploughed up after 30 years. Does that reflect a long-term vision?

Sue Hayman: What the hon. Lady has said reflects some of my own concerns. I also have concerns about backing everything on to net gain, which has not proved as effective as would have been hoped in other countries, such as Australia.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Sue Hayman: I am going to make some progress. I am aware of the shortage of time.

We will discuss the details of the Bill in Committee, but I want to touch on a few aspects of it now: the principle of non-regression, targets, and the independence and powers of the Office for Environmental Protection. I also want to mention, briefly, some of our concerns about biodiversity net gain, water, nature recovery strategies and recycling.

The Financial Times has reported that an official paper proposed to deviate from green standards set by the European Union, and that the UK was open to significant divergence despite the Prime Minister’s promise that standards would not fall. Can the Secretary of State shed any more light on the content of that official paper? The Government have missed four chances to guarantee equal environmental standards after Brexit. Will the Secretary of State now commit herself to an amendment to legally ensure non-regression on environmental standards? According to Greener UK, the environmental principles constitute “a significant and unacceptable weakening of the legal effect of the principles.”

May I ask the Secretary of State how that can be justified?

We know that the Government have missed a number of environmental targets, and that the number of serious pollution incidents recorded in 2018-19 rose to the highest level since 2014-15. A leaked document from last year showed that the Government had actually abandoned agreed targets for conserving England’s sites of special scientific interest, and we know that air quality targets have also been consistently flouted.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making some important points. Along with many other residents, I am currently opposing the building of an incinerator in Rumney, Trowbridge and St Mellons, in my constituency. My constituents are worried not only about the air quality implications of what comes out of the incinerator but about traffic particulates from heavy goods vehicles which, potentially, will be bringing waste to the site from all over the UK. Does my hon. Friend agree that that needs to be looked at?

Sue Hayman: I agree that we need to look at such issues extremely carefully when making planning decisions.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): If the Government are really serious about air quality, surely it is time for them to adopt a 100% standard, to include carbon capture and storage, in any environment Bill that they may introduce, and to give our industry an opportunity to thrive and survive.

Sue Hayman: It is a shame that funding for CCS was stopped some years ago. If that had not happened, we might be quite a bit further ahead.

All the targets in the Bill, including the interim targets, must be legally binding, and must be set to be achieved as soon as possible. It is commendable that the Bill confirms the creation of statutory environmental improvement plans to ensure legally binding environmental targets in areas such as air, water, waste and biodiversity by 2022, but Greenpeace has pointed out that it does not contain any provisions to hold the Government to those legal commitments until 2037. Given the climate and environment emergency that we face, can the Secretary of State explain why she is allowing a delay of nearly two decades before the Bill can have any real bite?

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): This weekend the River Ouse flooded yet again, and, four years after the floods that devastated the city of York, the Government have failed to address the serious need for upper catchment management to improve the diversity of the moorlands. Does my hon. Friend agree that that should be centre stage in the Bill?

Sue Hayman: As I am sure my hon. Friend knows, flooding is an issue that is close to my heart as well, and we certainly need to ask why it is not included more fundamentally in the Bill.

Although the Bill sets out responsibilities for improving air quality, it does not commit the Government to reaching the World Health Organisation’s goal of 10 micrograms per cubic metre by 2030 at the latest. The hon. Member for Bromley and Chislehurst (Robert Neill) mentioned that earlier, but he is no longer present, so I will ask the same question: will the Secretary of State agree to enshrine that target in the Bill, given the public health emergency caused by illegal air pollution?

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmirth) (Lab): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Sue Hayman: I really think that I need to make some progress.
Let me now say something about the independence of the proposed Office for Environmental Protection. As my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) has said, the only reason the Government have made any movement on waste, landfill and air quality is the threat of EU fines, so it is disappointing that the OEP will have no powers to issue such fines. Will the Secretary of State agree to consider enabling it to do so, in order to give it real teeth? I welcome the change enabling it to conduct investigations on its own initiative, but we should like it to be empowered to conduct broader inquiries into systemic issues, to make recommendations, and to issue guidance.

Greener UK has said:

“The bill includes several measures which could seriously undermine the water environment”.

Another hon. Member who has now left the Chamber mentioned abstraction. The proposed new powers for the Environment Agency to revoke abstraction licences would not come into play until 1 January 2028, although England’s water supplies are already under severe pressure. There are also no water efficiency commitments, although British water consumption is the highest in Europe. Can the Secretary of State explain how that omission can be in line with the Government’s pledge in their 25-year environment plan to reduce water use and halve water leakages by 2050?

I am pleased to see that the Bill includes a commitment to nature recovery networks, but it passes more powers and duties to local councils without attaching adequate funding.

Tracey Crouch: Like me, the hon. Lady will have seen many plans for housing developments in her constituency featuring lovely pictures of trees and shrubbery, and will know that the reality turns out to be very different. Does she, like me, welcome the commitment in the Bill to requiring developers to ensure that their developments improve biodiversity by at least 10%, either on site or nearby?

Sue Hayman: I agree that our planning and development should be much better in terms of environmental impact, and I think it important for us to set targets for that to be achieved.

The Bill does little to ensure that nature recovery strategies properly influence policy and decision making in areas such as planning—we may need to go further in some instances—environmental land management, and biodiversity net gain. In respect of biodiversity net gain, can the Secretary of State give us the rationale, in the context of a climate and environment emergency, for the exemption of national infrastructure projects, although they are often the most environmentally damaging development schemes? Can she also tell us why biodiversity net gain does not apply to private organisations?

Labour will seek further assurances that legally binding targets on waste minimisation will be introduced. Does the Secretary of State agree that the waste and resource efficiency measures are far too focused on end-of-life solutions to waste and recycling issues? The fact that potential single-use charges will apply only to plastic is a significant missed opportunity that could result in unintended consequences.

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): Labour-run St Helens Council is the leading English local authority investing in new technology, new vehicles and an innovative single-use recycling point. Does my hon. Friend agree that that burden should be shared between national and local government, particularly at a time when local authorities have been so financially constrained? Should the Government not concentrate on supporting authorities that are acting now, rather than waiting to fund those that are not at a later stage?

Sue Hayman: My hon. Friend has made an excellent point.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a powerful speech. Does she agree that we could cut out much of our waste through a system like the one that was introduced in Germany 20 years ago, the Grüne Punkt system, under which people leave packaging in supermarkets? That would quickly change the way in which producers supply products to our stores.

Sue Hayman: My hon. Friend gives an excellent example, and I thank him for that.

Anna McMorrin (Cardiff North) (Lab): Does my hon. Friend agree that we need 100% responsibility from the producers themselves, from the creation of waste right through to the clean-up, and that the recycling must also be looked at so that waste is not just shipped overseas, which is where it is going at present? We need to be conscious of all this. My Back-Bench Bill in the last Session addressed some of these areas, and I am pleased to see that some of it has been taken on board, but not all of it has been; we need to see that from the beginning of the life cycle to the end, so that when people go into the supermarkets they can actually make decisions based on this information.

Sue Hayman: That is right. It is important that we look at it right across the piece, from manufacturing down to what happens after we have finished using something.

Tellingly, waste recovery company Biffa has said that it is disappointed in the lack of ambition in the Bill, and it has called for plastics to be recycled domestically in the UK to restore public confidence in recycling and to boost UK jobs and investment. That will require a commitment from Government to further invest in UK recycling infrastructure, which is long overdue.

In conclusion, despite this being a move in the right direction it is clear that the provisions in the Bill are not sufficient when we consider the scale of the environmental and climate crisis we face. We need radical, targeted measures, and I ask the Secretary of State to work with the Opposition in Committee so that we can achieve this goal.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. There is an immediate time limit of four minutes on Back-Bench speeches.
7.51 pm

**Neil Parish** (Tiverton and Honiton) (Con): I am very pleased that the Government have introduced this Bill; the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee has conducted pre-legislative scrutiny, and I am glad the Bill has moved towards our recommendations. I welcome the fact that the Government will set a multi-annual budget for the Office for Environmental Protection and include climate change in the remit. However, I do want to make three points.

First, the Bill must not allow for any regression from our current high environmental standards; the Committee will look at this very carefully. The Committee will also examine how and when the Government can be held to account if they fail to meet the targets. In relation to air quality, while I welcome the Government’s plan to set a target, this target only needs to be set before 2022, and it is not clear how ambitious it must be. We must move much more to using electric cars in our inner cities and make sure they hold a lot of the renewable energy at night when recharged, to help use up and store our renewable energy. I ask the Government to match the World Health Organisation guidelines for dangerous emissions such as particulate matter. I appreciate that the Government might not want to mention WHO targets, which can change; however, committing to an actual figure so that it is a legal target is very important.

Secondly, the Government have proposed that the environmental principles currently enshrined in our legislation under EU law should be a policy statement. That has caused a great deal of concern. Principles such as the polluter pays are vital to environmental protection. A policy statement is much weaker and easier to revise, so I shall be interested to hear what the Secretary of State has to say about a much stronger commitment, as proposed in our report.

Thirdly, we need the OEP to be independent of the Government and sufficiently powerful. The previous Secretary of State foresaw that, and I hope that the current Secretary of State sees it in the same way. This new watchdog might need to be given sharper teeth than is proposed. There are already better models, such as the Office for Budget Responsibility.

To sum up, while I welcome the Bill, there certainly does need to be just a little improvement. That is why my Committee has just announced a new inquiry into the Bill so we can make constructive recommendations to the Government and ensure we achieve all we want, which is to leave the environment in a much better state than we found it, and we have made good progress. I also welcome the Secretary of State’s comments today about how we will deal with the Agriculture Bill: we can have a much better policy for agriculture than the common agricultural policy; it can be better for the environment and for food production, and we can do all the things that we really want to do.

**Scott Mann** (North Cornwall) (Con): I will be brief as many Members want to speak.

I have been out and seen one of the high-level stewardship schemes. Will my hon. Friend’s Committee consider whether the schemes could be administered locally, to look at fauna and fauna locally instead of on a national basis?

7.56 pm

**Neil Parish**: My hon. Friend makes a good point, because one thing we can do with the new stewardship schemes and with our agriculture and environment policy is to have a much more localised system of management, so we create greater biodiversity; we can manage in a way whereby we improve that. I would be very happy to look at what my hon. Friend asks for in the future, because we can link this Bill and the Agriculture Bill in so many ways, and we can have good healthy food along with a better environment. We can also help with flooding—a point made from the Opposition Benches—and manage land better, such as by holding back the water in certain places.

I also want to make a brief point about fisheries policy and environment policy. The one thing that Norway does so much better than the EU is to manage its fish stocks; it is able to shut down areas that are overfished overnight and can open up areas where fishing can be allowed. We can learn a great deal from the Norwegians and what happens in the Faroes. One thing we must not be absolutely convinced of in this place is that the EU is the fount of all wisdom; it certainly is not. So as we move forward with our Environment Bill and agriculture and fishing Bills, I hope we can bring in some great common sense, reducing bureaucracy but also delivering a better environment, better agriculture and better fisheries.
there is a section that has the ambition of ensuring seafloor habitats are productive and sufficiently extensive to support healthy, sustainable ecosystems. For a century, however, the MOD was simply dumping large quantities of unwanted explosives and chemical and biological weapons into the seas around our coasts—and it also threw in a load of radioactive waste for good measure.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): My hon. Friend is making a good point about the MOD and its responsibilities. I remember doing a school project in the ’90s about this, when there were things washing up on Scotland’s beaches. Does my hon. Friend agree that the UK Government must be a lot more ambitious about cleaning up their own mess?

Deidre Brock: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. It is utterly inexcusable that one Department that has so much impact on our environment is excused from its responsibilities in this way. I certainly remember reading about the 1995 incidents when explosives were washed up on the Clyde coast—a shocking occasion. The largest of those munitions dumps, at Beaufort’s dyke in the Irish sea, now has a gas pipe running through it, and none of it is even monitored, let alone tidied up. I know this because I have asked. How can that flagrant disregard for the marine environment align with this vague promise to look after the seabed? And how does that match up with excusing the MOD of any responsibility under the Bill?

There are other MOD sites, of course: the ship refuelling stations, the bases handling nuclear weapons and nuclear subs and the ranges where live firing is practised. We already know about the damaging health effects on former soldiers of some of the munitions they have dealt with, but we do not know anything about the weapons that are fired on those ranges. The MOD has told me that it does environmental audits with its “industry partner”, whatever that is, but that it will not publish them. We are not to be told about the environmental impact of this massive polluter, and it is being excused responsibility under the Bill. I do not think that is good enough. There is no such thing as acceptable environmental damage, and there should be no such thing as a Department with an environmental “get out of jail free” card.

Of course, this thing will ultimately pass—no one is going to vote down an environment Bill—but it really is not what is needed. Serious action to limit emissions and clean up the messes that have been left would be more worth while. For example, what about legislating so that English water companies cannot pay dividends to their shareholders while they are still pouring a precious resource into the ground? Or even better, why not copy the Scottish system and have a publicly owned water company that can spend on infrastructure because it does not have to make a profit? How about taking the power to close down companies that refuse to comply with best practice? How about telling them that their days of pouring pollutants into other people’s air and water are over? No soft touch, no more. “Come along now, play nicely”; instead, we need to say, “You do not get to do this any more.” And here is another thought: what about refusing to allow the import of products that can be shown to have a poor environmental footprint? None of that is in the Bill.

There is some target setting in there, but no indication of taking any power that might allow those targets to be met. Just last week, Ofgem refused to allow a subsea cable to be laid from Shetland to the mainland to allow the output from a large wind farm to get to potential customers. That was refused on the basis that subsidies have been withdrawn by this Government under its previous guises since 2010. Where is the provision in the Bill to put those subsidies back or—given that Shetland would like to press ahead anyway—to force the provision of the connection to the grid? Where is the ambition?

The creation of a clunky and unwieldy Office for Environmental Protection is a major disappointment. It will involve enforcement provisions that give weakness a bad name. Where are the prosecuting powers it needs? Where is its ability to act independently and develop the principles behind environmental law? There is nothing in the Bill to protect the Aarhus convention rights. Back in July 2016, I asked the then EFRA Secretary, the right hon. Member for South Northamptonshire (Andrea Leadsom), whether the UK would continue to abide by Aarhus after leaving the EU, and she replied:

“Until we leave the EU, EU law continues to apply so the UK continues to comply with EU law that implements obligations in the Aarhus Convention. The UK remains a Party to the Aarhus Convention.”

In November last year, I asked the next EFRA Secretary, the right hon. Member for Surrey Heath (Michael Gove), whether he planned to maintain compliance with the Aarhus convention on access to information, public participation in decision making and access to justice in environmental matters after the UK had left the EU, and he replied, “Yes”. So where are those commitments, and why are they not in the Bill? Will the Secretary of State undertake to bring forward amendments that will satisfy those commitments, and can we be assured that amendments will be tabled in Committee that will beef up the OEP? Can we at least give the tiger a set of dentures, if it is not going to have serious teeth?

I would like to ask some further questions about devolved issues. It would be helpful if Ministers set out how they developed their thinking on the need for the climate change measures and legislation to be covered by the OEP, and how they decided that this was needed. Also, do Scottish Ministers support the proposals? What consultation was undertaken with them prior to their inclusion? Will the Secretary of State set out what consultations were undertaken with them? What are those consultations about?

Leadsom), whether the UK would continue to abide by the Aarhus Convention. The UK remains a Party to the Aarhus Convention. And here is another thought: what about refusing to allow the import of products that can be shown to have a poor environmental footprint? None of that is in the Bill.

Every Member here will have had the same representations from environmental organisations that I have had. We all know that they are unhappy that there is no protection in the Bill against regression and that they fear that the legislation could be watered down in the future. I know that there will be armchair constitutional experts muttering into their pot that one Parliament cannot bind another, but we all know that politics makes that a lie. We all know that confident,
positive action arising from having the political will to deliver has a binding effect on future Parliaments and Governments. If it did not, the NHS would have disappeared decades ago. Strong action now to protect and enhance the environment, and repercussions for those who transgress, will set a tone that a future Government or Parliament would find hard to undo.

We need to see changes in the way we see waste. We must no longer think that we will deal with it when we come to it; rather, we need more planning not to create it in the first place. A bit of Government encouragement could do that, and plastics are not the only waste we should be concerned about. I am young enough to remember a time when aerosols were innocent cans that people used every morning, and most people never knew the damage that the gases could do. Well, we all know now, and the question is: what else are we blissfully ignorant of as we go about our comfortable, modern life? Cut the waste; do it in legislation; and do it now! Have courage! Take that courage in both hands and give us legislation that is fit for purpose. Do something stunning this year instead of something that could be described as stunningly stupid.

8.7 pm

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Ind): I always think that we get listened to better in this House if we can find something in what we say that is generous to the other side, so I will be generous and say that I welcome the Bill. I have come straight from the West Berkshire climate conference, which nearly 300 people attended. People from the community spoke with real passion about their interest in more than just dealing with greenhouse gases. They spoke about the need to reverse the declines in biodiversity, about addressing a resurgence in the value of our natural capital and of our rivers, about the wider aspects of land use that could see greater amounts of carbon sequestered, about flood protection and about policies with human wellbeing at their heart.

I see many positives in the Bill. I like the sound of the biodiversity net gain. I like seeing the 25-year plan being put on a statutory footing in the Bill. I also like the nature recovery strategies and many of the proposals on waste and plastic. I applaud my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for her introduction of the Bill. Having been involved in many negotiations with her Department, I know that clauses 16, 17 and 18 have taken a lot of work, and I am delighted to see how they have turned out. I implore hon. Members on both sides of the House and some of the organisations that are advising us to see the value of what is in here. It is this House and the national policy statement that the Secretary of State will make at the Dispatch Box that will be held to account, and that is crucial. That is in the wording of those clauses. It is this House and the democratic institutions that support us that will decide the future environmental direction of this and future Governments, rather than putting it in the hands of the courts, which would perhaps too often see it in a rather dry, legalistic sense. People can make these cases in Parliament with emotion and passion.

Clauses 73 to 87 relate to water, and I refer hon. Members to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. I am a great fan of regulation in this area. The water framework directive sets out demanding standards which, if not met, result in infraction fines from Europe. We are trying to encourage the Government to emulate that as best we can in this piece of legislation. It is worrying that England is behind on its targets to achieve good ecological status for all waterways by 2027, and the concern is that this Bill allows the Government to give themselves powers to amend difficult targets or the way in which they are measured. I hope that we will be able to tease out the Government’s precise intentions during the Bill’s passage, because there is bold ambition across the House to address the failings of past years on our waterways.

I also want the Bill to do more to tackle water consumption. We are able to have targets for reducing particulate matter, so why can we not have targets to tackle water consumption? Abstraction is a major problem for our environment, and I want greater measures to address it.

In totality, there is much to applaud the Government on, and I hope we will hear from Members on both sides of the House at least an acceptance that the Government are noble in their intention to create something that will have a lasting effect down the generations. I applaud the Secretary of State for bringing in this Bill.

8.11 pm

Mary Creagh (Wakefield) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon). I share some of his concerns about the potential watering down of targets made by Ministers and then enacted or judged by a body that is appointed by Ministers.

It is important to remember why we are here. We are here because of Brexit. We are here because, in the 1970s, the UK was the dirty man of Europe—or the dirty person, as I think we should probably call ourselves—and we pumped raw sewage into the sea. Thanks, however, to the European Union’s level playing field provisions, which allow no member state to race to the bottom and compete on the environment, we now have cleaner beaches, drive more fuel-efficient cars and have reduced our waste going to landfill.

I see Brexit as a clear and present danger to the UK environment. Yes, the Government have, through the original European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, copied and pasted some EU law into UK law. The danger is that it will become zombie legislation that is no longer monitored, enforced or updated. There is a troublesome third that cannot be cut and pasted that this Bill is designed to address, but there is nothing to stop those targets, as the right hon. Gentleman said, being quietly reversed by a future Government. Leaving the EU means that we risk losing those key protections and an entire system of the regulation of chemicals under REACH, which means that UK companies that sell right across the European Union that have already spent hundreds of millions of pounds registering thousands of chemicals with the European Union now face a double regulatory burden if and when the UK Government set up their own chemicals regulator.

Food safety could be compromised, and we could end up with higher pesticide residue in food if protections are negotiated away to secure a trade deal with the United States. Our farmers are the custodians of our environment—I pay tribute to the amazing farmers
doing such a brilliant job in Wakefield—but they face a triple whammy through loss of subsidies. For example, the CAP subsidies are only guaranteed by the Government until the end of 2022.

Jane Dodds (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): Many of the excellent farmers in my constituency of Brecon and Radnorshire are keen to do whatever they can to help the environment. Does the hon. Lady agree that the Government should ensure that measures for protecting the environment are joined up with land management policies that support our farmers?

Mary Creagh: I wholeheartedly agree with the hon. Lady, and I pay tribute to the farmers in her constituency. We now how dependent their incomes are on CAP subsidies, but the Agriculture Bill, which Members spent many months debating, and the fisheries Bill were both frozen and then not carried over, so the Government are resetting the clock. There are no guarantees about what happens post 2022 and what farmers know—

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mary Creagh: I will not give way, because I want to make some progress. Farmers face tariffs and checks on their EU exports and increased competition from countries with lower food, animal welfare and environmental standards. The previous withdrawal agreement negotiated by the previous Prime Minister contained a level playing field non-regression commitment, but the new European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill, which was presented by the Prime Minister and then withdrawn in some sort of deal in order to get an early general election, contains no such comfort.

We are debating a Bill that may or may not progress into Committee and that my Environmental Audit Committee—I pay tribute to colleagues from across the House—spent many weeks and months examining and trying to make better. However, if there is no agreement between the UK and the EU about our future agreement by the end of the transition period in December 2020, there will be no legal requirement for us to maintain existing standards and protections. I am worried about the possibility of significant divergence, so I am concerned about what Brexit will do.

My Committee made several recommendations, particularly in the area of extended producer responsibility. We recommended a latte levy to reduce the 2.5 billion single-use coffee cups that are thrown away every year, but the Government said no. We wanted a 1p charge on every garment sold in the UK to tackle 300,000 tonnes of textile waste that goes to landfill or is incinerated every year, but the Government again said no. I am pleased that the Bill has adopted some of the recommendations of the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and my Environmental Audit Committee, meaning that carbon budgets and targets are legally enforceable.

However, I am still concerned that the watchdog is toothless, the targets are too little, too late, and the environmental principles are not on the face of the Bill, and I look forward to quizzing the Secretary of State about the watchdog. This Government have more experience in shutting watchdogs down—they scrapped the Royal Commission on Environmental Pollution and the Sustainable Development Commission—than in setting them up, and I hope to quiz her further tomorrow.

8.16 pm

Mr Robert Goodwill (Scarborough and Whitby) (Con): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), on whose Environmental Audit Committee I served until March this year, when I was called back to the Front Bench, but here I am again back on the Back Benches.

For many years, our core environmental policies had been jointly agreed at EU level, with proposals from the European Commission being amended and confirmed by the Council of Ministers and the European Parliament. Indeed, I served in the European Parliament between 1999 and 2004 on the environment committee, so many of the directives and regulations currently in force were agreed when I was there. Indeed, I attended many of the conciliation meetings late into the night that hammered out the detail of much of this legislation.

Leaving the European Union gives us an opportunity to take back control and to move forwards, not backwards. The Bill will secure the progress that we have made on a wide range of environmental priorities and put in place the framework needed to keep pace with EU and global standards. It will also allow us to take the lead in setting new levels of performance: we will no longer have to move at the speed of the slowest.

Sir Greg Knight: I agree with my right hon. Friend’s point. Does he agree that we could help to improve standards in food labelling by tightening up requirements?

Mr Goodwill: Indeed. We now have the freedom to do that.

The hon. Member for Cardiff South and Penarth (Stephen Doughty) was worried about incinerators being built in his constituency, but it is European policy to phase out landfill and replace it with clean incinerators that operate under the standards imposed by the large combustion plants directive. Leaving the EU means that we could go back to dirty, polluting landfill instead of having cleaner incinerators, but I do not believe that that is the way forward.

The hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) talked about the military. When passing legislation in Europe on vehicle emissions, I recall that there was almost always an exception for military use for vehicles and for noise, particularly for aircraft.

The hon. Member for Wakefield made a good point about our progress in improving many of our environmental standards since becoming a member of the European Union. Our rivers are cleaner, we have salmon in rivers where they have never been seen before, and our bathing water is cleaner. Indeed, the new standards that have been brought in have often led people to believe that we are going backwards, because beaches that had passed under the previous standards then failed when the standards were tightened up. While we can set ambitious and challenging new standards, we must ensure that people are aware of when we have made progress, even if we fail to hit the higher standards. Legislation was introduced at the same time as privatisation and meant that investment in water quality did not have to join the queue behind
hospitals, schools and the other priorities of Government. It was privatisation that allowed us to deliver on such great projects as the Burniston sewage works in my constituency, the £50 million storm water tank in Scarborough and the new Irton water treatment works that are being built. The real risk to our water quality is not from leaving the EU but from nationalisation, which would once again mean investment in water quality having to join the queue behind other priorities, such as the NHS.

While we were in Europe we passed the REACH regulations and the chemicals registration legislation, which meant that we tested a back catalogue of chemicals, at a cost of £6 billion, during the course of which 100,000 animals were tested. We must not have to redo all that work and test all those animals alone. Although we are transferring responsibility to the Health and Safety Executive, we should not go it alone. Indeed, in the political declaration on 10 October, we talked about exploring the possibility of co-operation. I believe that associate membership of the European Chemicals Agency is the right way forward, while at the same time retaining the right to independence, so that if political decisions are made on chemicals such as glyphosate, we can do our own thing.

I was pleased to see the compulsory recall of vehicles in the legislation. Having been a Transport Minister at the time of the Volkswagen debacle, I think that is important. Clause 50 and schedule 10, on plastic return, are important, so long as we ensure that any schemes put in place are carbon-negative. Schemes such as reusable bottles can look good at the outset but can often mean transporting heavy glass around the country.

There are concerns in urban areas about the restrictions on coal and wood for burning, particularly for steam vehicles—I own one—and about access to coal, and also in rural areas, where no gas is available. I was pleased to see clause 63, which deals with litter. Maybe council enforcement officers could do other work in that area—for instance, on parking.

I hope to be fortunate enough to serve on the Bill Committee. Leaving the EU is an opportunity for our environment. This Bill gives us the tools we need to fully exploit those opportunities.

8.21 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): I, too, hope that I will be able to serve on the Bill Committee.

I welcome the direction of travel and the fact that we are discussing these issues in such detail. However, given that we have only a short amount of time, I want to focus on a few concerns about the Bill. The first is that, as others have said, there is no commitment to non-regression in environmental standards. We are being asked to take the Government’s word for it that they will not lower standards in any future trade deal. I am sorry to say that I just do not believe that. The Government took non-regression out of the withdrawal agreement, and a recent leaked DEFRA briefing stated that the Department for International Trade would be putting it under significant pressure to lower standards. I served on the Public Bill Committee for the Agriculture Bill and tabled new clause 1 on Report, but we know from the reaction we got when we tried to get something put in writing, that, frankly, if you like it, you gotta put a ring on it—as Beyoncé once said. I just do not accept the oral assurances. That measure needs to be enshrined in the Bill.

The environmental principles are not enshrined in law in the Bill either. Instead, Ministers only have to have due regard to them, which is a significant step backwards compared with the current EU arrangement. Long-term targets do not need to be set until 2022 and might not be enforced for almost two decades. We must have shorter-term milestones, perhaps in the same way that we have carbon budgets under the Climate Change Act 2008, because we need to know. There is no point getting almost to the deadline and realising that we have failed hopelessly to meet the targets. There has to be a way of monitoring progress more quickly.

I very much welcome the fact that the Office of Environmental Protection will be based in Bristol. I welcome the jobs that will come, but it needs the resources. We know from the Environmental Audit Committee and the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee—I am a member of both—that the Environment Agency struggles to do its job in enforcing the laws that exist because it simply does not have the resources; the waste hierarchy, for example, is just not enforced. Everything becomes meaningless unless there is adequate staffing, resources and expertise, and the Office of Environmental Protection will also need the independence to act.

The EU water framework directive was agreed 20 years ago, and I am concerned that time is running out for the Government to meet their targets. The final deadline for the UK’s rivers and streams to be in good condition—to achieve good ecological status—is 2027. At the moment, we are at 14%, which compares with an average of 40% in the EU. I am not convinced that this Bill alone will be enough to bring us up to scratch by the 2027 deadline.

Finally, the Bill is very much about what we are doing in this country. It does not address the role that the UK is playing in driving the destruction of nature overseas, which is something that we have discussed in Westminster Hall both earlier today and in the debate a few weeks ago on the deforestation of the Amazon. We must look at reducing our international footprint, too. I completely support calls by the World Wide Fund for Nature and Global Witness to amend the Bill to provide for a due diligence obligation requiring businesses to assess what is happening through their supply chains and investment activities in other countries, and to take appropriate action to avoid and mitigate any negative environmental impacts. If they cannot avoid those negative environmental impacts, they ought to cease operations and investments in those countries. We cannot have UK companies paying lip service to the need to protect our environment at home, yet supporting the deforestation of the Amazon and all sorts of other environmental destruction in other countries.

8.25 pm

Damian Hinds (East Hampshire) (Con): I support this Bill. It is ambitious in its scope and its aims, and it starts, quite rightly, from the viewpoint of natural capital—the realisation that natural assets underpin all other types of productive capital, whether manufactured,
financial, human or social. In a sense, the Bill builds on, and is analogous to, the successful Climate Change Act framework, with the environmental improvement plans and the Office for Environmental Protection.

This Government are determined to have a green Brexit. Notwithstanding what the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) said, it is nonsense to suggest that the European Union is the only thing that will keep this country on a path to a better, greener future. [Interruption.] The evidence for that—as she knows, despite her shaking her head—can be seen in, for example, what has happened on climate change, with our leadership on offshore wind, with this country being the first major nation to set an end date for unabated coal and, of course, with our legislating for net zero. These are all things that happened over and above EU frameworks—and all things, by the way, that happened with a Conservative Prime Minister.

There were concerns in 2016, quite justifiably, but they centred on the fact that EU monitoring and enforcement mechanisms would obviously be going and on the environmental principles underpinning legislation. This Bill addresses those points and sets the framework to go further. On one of those areas, air quality, the World Health Organisation target is more exacting than the UK target; in future we will have the opportunity to follow it. The Government have said that it is technically feasible for us to do that at some point, but it has to happen at a credible pace. We cannot just will the thing to happen. I hope that, during the passage of the Bill and beyond, we can get more detail on how the Government envisage that happening.

Andrew Selous (South West Bedfordshire) (Con) rose—

Damian Hinds: If my hon. Friend will forgive me, I will not give way because of the number of speakers.

I have a few asks of the Minister, not all of them legislative, some of them complementary to the legislation. The first is on fly-tipping, which has a huge cost for my constituency, in terms not only of the responsibility for landowners, who have this stuff visited upon them, but, increasingly, of the cost of putting in place gates and other infrastructure to try to prevent it. I hope we can see higher financial penalties and greater risk for the perpetrator, including the seizing of vehicles.

Trees stand at the intersection of what we are trying to do on climate change and on clean air, and the importance of the physical environment. I very much welcome the Bill’s provisions on street trees, but we can do so much more. My local council has committed, over time, to planting one tree for every resident in the district, and I wonder what incentives can be given to others.

On engine idling, I know that the Department for Transport is currently reviewing its guidance on enforcement, but what more can be done on public information to persuade people not to idle their engines, particularly outside schools.

On electric vehicles, I hope the Minister will continue to work strongly with the DFT, the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy and others to make sure that the improved performance of electric cars and the way the costs have come down are more widely understood.

I pay tribute to local groups doing practical work: those doing litter picks and sorting litter to help to educate the public: the schools in my constituency that provide recycling for crisp packets; the repair cafés we have seen across the country, and so on. I welcome the principles and so many aspects of this Bill: those on resource efficiency and recycling; the single-use provisions; the deposit return scheme and the measures on waste crime, those on biodiversity and net gain; those on tree cover; and those on the most fundamental, elemental things of all—water and the quality of the air we breathe. If given an opportunity to vote this evening, I will be proud to vote for the Bill.

8.29 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): At a time when we needed a strong environmental Bill, this one regrettably goes backwards; not forwards, in a great number of areas. For example, on non-regression, as many other hon. Members have said, we have had countless promises that leaving the EU will not lead to backsliding on environmental protections, including from the Prime Minister just last week, but if those promises are genuine let us make it official, with a straightforward commitment to non-regression within this Bill.

The environmental principles need serious strengthening, including an unambiguous duty on all public bodies to apply them to policy and funding decisions. Crucially, that duty must be in the Bill, not relegated to a policy statement that we have not even seen, much less had an input into. We need stronger powers and real independence for the Office for Environmental Protection, for example, by giving Parliament a greater role in appointments. The setting of targets must be based on independent, expert scientific advice. The fact that the Bill currently would allow the Secretary of State unilaterally to weaken a target on a whim is completely unacceptable.

We also need legally binding interim milestones. We face an ecological emergency, and it is utterly unacceptable that the Bill could give the Government almost two decades before they are legally required to meet any new targets.

The Bill must also cover the enormous overseas environmental footprint of the UK’s domestic consumption and economic activities. Just last week, statistics from the Office for National Statistics revealed that Britain has become the biggest net importer of carbon dioxide emissions per capita in the G7 group of wealthy nations, outstripping the United States and Japan, as a result of buying goods manufactured abroad. So that has to be part of this Bill.

There is, however, an even more fundamental problem with the Bill—a glaring omission. I refer to the economy, because if we are to truly turn around our relationship with nature, we must confront this elephant in the room: the current economic system, where the environment is too often just an afterthought, and the wellbeing of people and nature comes second to the pursuit of economic growth. Too often we see that at the national level, especially in Treasury decisions, yet the Bill exempts “taxation, spending and the allocation of resources within government” from the environmental principles and from the scrutiny of the Office for Environmental Protection. We see the results of this already at a local level, where the prioritisation
of economic growth means that projects such as the Oxford-Cambridge expressway are strongly supported, even though they mean the destruction of stunning wildflower meadows, ancient woodlands, hedgerows and so forth.

The Government clearly believe in the infinite ability to decouple economic growth from environmental impacts, but if we look at the evidence, we see that there is no case in respect of absolute decoupling at the scale and speed we need, and it is simply fanciful to assume that that is going to be possible. The UN report on the declining state of world nature from IPBES—the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services—which was published earlier this year explicitly identified the growth of the global economy and, specifically, the growth of material consumption in affluent nations as one of the major driving forces behind these trends. It is unambiguous about the need to move away from endless consumption and GDP as a key measure of economic success, stating that we must steer “away from the current limited paradigm of economic growth” to include other indicators that are better able to capture more holistic, long-term views of economics and quality of life. It means that we have to shift beyond standard economic indicators such as GDP.

Although there are some things in the Bill to welcome, overall it is going in the wrong direction. Crucially, it is not accepting that an economy based on infinite economic growth is never going to be sustainable. We have to change the way our economy works, as well as the way our environment works.

8.33 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): I do not like to totally contradict the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), but I think that there is so much in the Bill to welcome. I applaud my hon. Friend the Member for Taunton Deane (Rebecca Pow), the Minister sitting on the Front Bench, as well as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State and the whole Department for their work to demonstrate how we can lead the way on environmental issues outside the EU.

I turn briefly to three aspects of the Bill. First, there is recycling. At the moment, every group of young people in Basingstoke whom I speak to want to talk about the plastics deposit scheme—an idea that has captured the imagination of young people, who want us to go further with such practical ways to help protect their environment for the future. I wholeheartedly applaud the Government’s ambition for all plastic packaging to be recyclable, reusable or compostable by 2025.

However, will the Minister touch on the National Audit Office’s concern about the lack of checks on what happens to recyclable material when it is exported abroad? My local authority has taken a principled approach: it does not allow recyclable plastics from Basingstoke to be exported. That means, however, that we are finding it difficult to secure a domestic contract for the disposal of mixed plastics, which has had an impact on our recycling rates. We need an ethical approach and a level playing field, so that local authorities such as mine are not penalised for taking a strategic decision not to export their plastics.

The second issue that I was delighted to see in the Bill was that of air pollution, on which I have been campaigning with my local authority for a number of years. I particularly applaud the long-term target on particulates in the air, which affect not only the climate but the health of our constituents more directly. I urge the Government to look specifically at the British Lung Foundation’s proposals for tailored interventions around schools and nurseries. They should look no further than Basingstoke and the rest of Hampshire for a lead. Hampshire County Council is taking a lead with the My Journey project, which goes into schools to raise awareness of the impact that the idling of engines can have on air quality outside schools. The Clean Air campaign in Basingstoke aims to stop idling that might increase pollution in any area. All this is not because we have pollution problems in Basingstoke, but because we want to prevent such problems from starting in the first place. I urge the Minister to keep a close eye on the impact of those campaigns.

On water supply, I welcome the measures in the Bill to encourage transfers between regions rather than over-abstraction, which damages wildlife. However, a significant cost is associated with that, and I urge the Minister to be clearer on how that will be met.

In conclusion, the Bill is about what we can all do to tackle environmental issues in our constituencies: I shall take one small example from my own. Back in 2007, a water cycle study identified a significant problem with water pollution in the River Loddon. As a result of fantastic work by Thames Water, our local environment agency, our catchment partnership and others, we have managed to tackle the problem through groundbreaking technology. There has been a step change in our water quality because local people have acted, and local people have cared.

8.37 pm

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Our environment is the most important resource that we have—no amount of money or social capital can replace the rivers on which we rely for irrigation and water, the soil that we need to grow food, and the air that gives us life. We need to get the Bill right if we want to look our children and grandchildren in the eye and truly say that we have left them with a better future through our actions.

Under this Bill, the Government could sit on their hands for three whole years before setting legally binding, long-term environmental targets that would be due at the very least 15 years after the target was set. Why is there a need for such a long delay? There is a need to get the targets right, but time is fleeting in the race to save our environment, and in many cases the earlier action is taken, the less work is needed overall to hit environmental goals in long-term strategies. Can the Minister confirm tonight that the Government plan to bring forward targets long before then, and certainly so that we are not left with no environmental targets when we leave the transition period?

Even if the Government miss their own targets, the enforcement method mooted to replace the EC in judging the Government on their environmental record is not fit for purpose. A letter from the Chair of the Environmental Audit Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh), who is not currently in her place, highlighted how little progress had been made to deal with the concerns raised by both the Environment,
Food and Rural Affairs Committee and the EAC about the lack of independence of the proposed Office for Environmental Protection and its legal enforcement powers. They are, in the words of Professor Maria Lee of University College London, “strikingly weak” for those who feel foul of protection of our environment.

Will this enforcement body have the tools necessary to carry out its functions? Given that a report by Unchecked highlighted the slashing of the Environment Agency budget by more than 60% under Lib Dem and Conservative austerity Governments resulting in an 80% drop in prosecutions, despite weekly serious pollution incidents, may I ask the Minister whether she shares the concerns of the Institute for Government and Prospect that the current funding mechanism could leave the proposed Office for Environmental Protection similarly vulnerable to underfunding by Governments who simply want to avoid environmental scrutiny? The Prime Minister promised a world-class watchdog to improve on current standards, but what we have is a lapdog and a Prime Minister who cannot be trusted to keep his promises, even when the livelihoods of the next generation depend upon it.

This is the latest in a long line of warm words from the Conservatives on the environment while we have seen the end of solar subsidies and support for biomass, no support for onshore wind, the sale of the Green Investment Bank, and the end of funding for the Swansea tidal lagoon. My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield, who is no longer in her place, prevented those on the Government Benches and the Liberal Democrats from selling off our precious woodlands to the highest bidder. We have also moved away from revolutionary zero carbon homes.

We really do need a Government who will put the environment at the heart of everything that they do, not a Government who, sadly, see a cheap photo opportunity while they sell the prospects for prosperity of the next generation down the river.

8.41 pm

Mr Philip Dunne (Ludlow) (Con): I join colleagues—at least those on the Government Benches—in welcoming this groundbreaking Bill. The Opposition’s position on this Bill is illustrative of the fact that even though they may not be prepared to vote for a general election, they are demonstrating, from the contributions they are making to this debate, that despite the wide cross-party consensus in favour of an environmental Bill and the many measures that have been included in it, they cannot bring themselves to congratulate the Government on bringing it forward.

It is timely that today we are talking about an environment Bill. It is a day when parts of the Welsh Marches, including much of Shropshire and my constituency, are recovering from a significant water event—something like 50 mm of rain fell in 36 hours on Friday and Saturday leading to widespread flooding, because it landed on saturated ground. The River Severn has barricades up in Shrewsbury and Ironbridge. The Rivers Clun and Teme in my constituency burst their banks. The town of Clun has been cut in two, and some roads around my constituency are impassable. Vehicles have been flooded and are abandoned, and the road network between Cardiff and Manchester has been held up as a result of ballast being washed away. My point is to illustrate how significant it is that we have started to take measures to address the climate emergency. We cannot stop the rain falling, but we can do things about it when it arrives. What I want to spend my few moments talking about are some of the important water measures in this Bill.

I am a member of the Environmental Audit Committee, and I very much hope to serve on the Bill Committee because I want to press the Government to use the opportunity of this Bill to do more to raise the ecological status of our rivers. It is not acceptable that 84% of our rivers are not meeting current standards. We need to raise those standards and ensure that all our rivers meet them. I will be urging the Government to consider proposals for water companies that I have raised previously in this House with the Secretary of State to see whether there are alternative means to try to use current technologies—novel technologies and, frankly, less intrusive technologies, such as integrated constructed wetlands—as a way to treat and improve the effluent and the consequence of flooding, with run-off foul waters getting into our rivers through such mechanisms.

I wish to touch briefly on governance. The Government have raised targets in the Bill in a number of areas: water, air, biodiversity, resource efficiency and waste reduction, which are all welcome. There have been complaints that the targets are not tough enough and that it is taking a while to introduce them, but it is a step forward and reflects some of the recommendations made in the pre-legislative scrutiny by the EAC that there will be five-yearly interim milestones for the targets and that they will be annually reported on by both the Government and the Office for Environmental Protection. That provision was sought by our Committee and is therefore welcome.

I share the desire across the House that we should see measures to prevent the regression of the standards, and I think that is something we should be pressing for in Committee; that may rule out my serving on the Bill Committee, but I make the offer none the less. As far as the Office for Environmental Protection is concerned, it is important to have a pre-appointment hearing to ensure independence, and I endorse the suggestion that it is jointly reviewed by the EAC in addition to the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee.

8.45 pm

Vera Hobhouse (Bath) (LD): I welcome this legislation, which is long overdue, but of course it is only necessary because this Government want to leave the European Union, which has for a long time been a force for good when it comes to environmental protection.

Environmental degradation is at an all-time high and we need to be bold to safeguard our natural world for our children and our children’s children. It is important to enshrine standards in law, especially if the EU legislation becomes no longer relevant. But the targets that this Bill sets out are deeply inadequate: 2037 is the first year that the Government would be required to meet their targets, which will not even be set until 2022. We are living through a climate emergency and we need climate action now, not in 18 years’ time.

The year 2037 is far too late to start holding the Government to account. We need to undertake a 10-year emergency emissions reduction programme, seeking to cut emissions as much as possible by 2030. The Liberal
Democrats have a credible plan to cut most emissions by 2030 and get to net zero by 2045. Targets are meaningless on their own. We must ensure that local authorities, under the new Office for Environmental Protection, are empowered to hold the Government to account. If they are not, we risk this fundamentally important legislation being reduced to a Christmas wish list.

One of the key features of the legislation is the new Office for Environmental Protection, which seeks to replace the current protections we enjoy under EU bodies. This proposed organisation, however, has extremely limited independence, relying on central Government for funding, appointments and target setting. In addition, it lacks the power to fine Governments. It is a toothless version of our current provisions, which come from the EU and can hold the Government to account through hefty fines. This is exactly what happened with the air pollution problems. Only when ClientEarth came along and actually threatened to fine the Government did the Government finally act. This Government’s fixation on leaving the EU will cause untold damage. We are facing a true climate emergency and our environment is in the firing line. Now is not the time to abandon international co-operation.

The Government’s focus on plastics and clean air is welcome. However, the proposed actions once again fall short. Single-use plastics need to be part of a wider policy around recycling and waste. We need to improve recycling across the country by improving consistency, so that people can become familiar with how to separate waste and do not have to adjust to a new regime every time they move to another area. Local authorities should be able to set their policy, but they should be supported by the Government and manufacturers, which should make products easier to recycle. Our European neighbours set a very good example in this regard. For instance, Norway has only 18 different categories for recycling; this country has many, many more. Restricting the plastics we use is very important.

Clean air is a big priority for my constituents in Bath, and I am personally disappointed by the lack of ambition on these issues. We need a new legal limit for air quality that matches those set by the World Health Organisation; a duty on public bodies to do their part to tackle air pollution; and a right to clean air enshrined in domestic law.

We can all talk about wanting to do something about the environment and say, “Yes, there’s a climate emergency”, but it is ambition that matters and this piece of legislation definitely lacks ambition.

Focusing on those two areas will lead to healthier soils, better quality, more nutritious food, and nature recovery. I have seen myself from visits to many farms in Cornwall that nature recovery goes hand in glove with producing more high-quality food. Stewardship of the land undertaken by farmers can be just as important as that undertaken by our much loved wildlife trusts such as Cornwall Wildlife Trust.

Secondly, while Parliament has been taking world-leading action on climate and nature recovery, too few people know where to go to find out what is actually going on and what they can do to help. This needs to change, and quickly, because far too often I see misrepresentations of the facts, or even lies, being spread. It is not just our air, our water and our soil that is being poisoned—it is our politics too. Information is power. The Government need to invest in easily accessible, independent and expert information on what action is being taken across all sectors of society to deliver our net zero and new nature recovery targets. This will help to increase confidence and trust in politics.

Leaving our environment in a better condition for the next generation is something we can all agree on. In the creation of the groundbreaking Climate Change Act 2008, this House came to a radical political consensus. I hope and pray that as we approach the general election, all of us, and all political parties, will do everything we can to maintain this consensus, because, as the Secretary of State rightly said, what could be more important for any Member of Parliament than to do that?

8.52 pm

Ruth Jones (Newport West) (Lab): It is good to be able to participate in this crucial debate tonight.

We need everyone in this House to be working hard to ensure that we are the generation that stopped the rot and left this country in a better state than when we started. We must put in place strong policies and ambitious but achievable targets, not just for ourselves but for our children and their children, and we must act now—we cannot delay as that will spell disaster for our planet. I recognise that this Bill includes what would seem at first glance to be relatively comprehensive legal targets, but it can and should go further. I will be working with colleagues to ensure that the Bill is amended and, importantly, strengthened to ensure that the United Kingdom does not fall behind European Union standards.

I am concerned that the Bill does not set itself a target for air quality and only requires the Secretary of State to set a 15-year target for particulates based on expert advice and subject to economic analysis. The Local Government Association, speaking for local authorities across the United Kingdom, is calling for more powers to be given to councils to tackle air pollution, and I hope that the Government will think about going further. That is important because poor air quality contributes to the early deaths of up to 40,000 people in the UK each year. This is not just a devastating and avoidable loss of life; it is costing the economy too. Research from the British Heart Foundation found that diseases attributable to air pollution in the UK result in over £20 billion-worth of economic costs.

I would like to pay particular tribute to all the children and young people across the United Kingdom who are speaking out and standing up for action to protect our
I welcome the Environment Bill, especially the nature recovery strategies. Many good things have been said this evening, which I will not repeat, but I want to raise a few issues that are particular to my constituency, such as the Cornish chough. In 2016, a review of special protected areas found that they are inadequate for the Cornish chough and choughs across the UK. I would love the Secretary of State to look at that, to ensure that the Cornish chough, which is already in good recovery, has ample opportunity to recover further. It requires grazing land, so we need to be careful, as we progress with decarbonisation, that we do not get rid of cattle altogether.

I am the species champion for the Manx shearwater, a ground-nesting bird that has recovered remarkably on Scilly because we have been able to cull rats and get rid of plastic and other litter. I would welcome the Secretary of State looking at how we can fund such recovery programmes, because the Manx shearwater provides an excellent example of communities working together with the proper funds—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order.

8.58 pm

Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): Constituents of all ages tell me of their concerns about the environment, climate change, plastics, waste and recycling, wildlife habitats and noise from planes, neighbours and cars. I see no mention of noise in the Bill, which is a worrying omission, but because of my limited time, I will focus on one issue of particular local concern, which is air quality.

Air pollution causes early deaths, with spikes of emergency calls and acute illness on days when it is bad. It is a major issue in my constituency, which has inadequate public transport and an over-dependence on car travel, with major roads running between London and Heathrow. More than 38 million people live in areas where air quality breaches legal limits, and my constituents are among them. Although there is not yet enough data, many of my constituents are concerned about the air pollution from aeroplanes.

The Central Office of Public Interest has a website with postcode links showing nitrogen dioxide air pollution levels, using data from Kings College London. The tool shows that my home in the middle of my constituency has significant air pollution from nitrogen dioxide, with an annual average of 36 micrograms per cubic metre, which is just under the World Health Organisation legal limit of 40 micrograms per cubic metre. This allegedly leads to an 11% increased risk of disease-related mortality for me and my family. By the way, here in Westminster we are exposed to almost 49 micrograms per cubic metre.

The London Mayor, Sadiq Khan, has been taking the lead on air pollution. By taking action in introducing the ultra low emission zone, we have seen a 35% cut in nitrogen dioxide emissions, with over 13,000 fewer polluting cars in central London. He has commissioned zero and low-emission buses for the fleet, which has seen a significant cut in NO\textsubscript{2} emissions on Chiswick High Road. He has launched a £25 million car scrappage scheme so that individuals can trade in dirty and polluting vehicles. Owing to his package of air quality measures, the number of schools in London in illegally polluted areas will reduce from over 450 to zero by 2025.
I thank the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Because of the problems with the clock, I call Derek Thomas for another two minutes. I want to hear more about shearwaters.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): That is really good of you.

Derek Thomas: Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker—and I thank the hon. Member for Brentford and Isleworth (Ruth Cadbury) for her intervention. [Laughter.]

For the Environment Bill, Rewilding Britain has made some incredible observations about what could be achieved with public money for the public good. It says that 6 million hectares of rewinding—regenerating woodland, peatlands and species-rich grasslands—would actually sequester 10% of our UK greenhouse gases. This is a real opportunity. It would cost us £1.9 billion, which is £1.1 billion less than the common agricultural policy costs us at the moment. In Cornwall, we have a commitment to a forest for Cornwall in my constituency, and we are working to plant 20,000 trees.

With this Environment Bill, there is a real opportunity for us to work together to reduce greenhouse gases, but also to improve the environment for generations to come. With that, Mr Deputy Speaker, I will sit down.

Mr Deputy Speaker: That is really good of you. Thank you.

Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): There is no doubt that the UK is leading the world when it comes to tackling climate change. This Bill allows the Government to map out our path to be net zero by 2050. Progress is so important, as issues such as air quality are really impacting people’s lives today.

The World Health Organisation’s advice is that annual average particulate matter should not exceed 10 micrograms per cubic metre. I was shocked to learn that we in Chichester averaged 9.09 in 2017. For those who do not know Chichester, we are a very protected area. Some 66% of the constituency is protected either via the area...
of outstanding natural beauty in the coastal area to the south or via the South Downs national park. Despite that, my constituency ranked 268th worst in the UK for air quality, so we need to do more to clean up our air.

Although I welcome the devolution of environmental protection plans, the national guidance needs to take into account the local environment. For example, Midhurst in my constituency is a small town in the heart of the South Downs. The area has poor air quality due to traffic, and it has failed indicative nitrogen oxide tests since 2015. Now the council is implementing air quality management areas, and a much needed action plan is in place, but the levels needed to meet the requirements are too high for rural areas. Therefore, moving forward, I hope the Government will lower the thresholds required to get designation for rural areas.

Steve Brine: One reason for the poor air quality levels in my hon. Friend’s constituency could well be the A27, which blights the lives of many people there. In a similar way, we have junction 9 of the M3 in my constituency. It seems counterintuitive to have road change plans, but having traffic flowing properly would increase air quality, because that traffic would not be sitting idling or pummelling through residential areas.

Gillian Keegan: I completely agree. There are huge blockages in traffic flow on the A27 and at the junction on the M3. That needs to be sorted out. I hope the £25 billion that is being invested in road infrastructure will address both of those issues and both of those roads.

Chichester is also famous for its harbour and the Chichester Harbour Conservancy, led by Richard Craven, who does a fantastic job. However, despite its efforts there are still concerns about water quality. I therefore hope that the Secretary of State will use the powers in the Bill to work with industry to address issues such as sewage water leaching and storm drain discharge into pristine marine environments. I hope she will work with boating communities like mine to better develop a network of waste water collection sites for leisure boats, as boats releasing sewage directly into our waterways increases harmful bacteria and nitrate levels.

Chichester harbour’s importance is not just about biodiversity. Recent analysis by the RSPB shows that areas such as the harbour and Pagham nature reserve, which is also in my constituency, are massive carbon sinks, with up to 310 tonnes per hectare. Maintaining such carbon-rich natural environments to a high standard not only benefits nature but helps us to mitigate climate change.

The Bill rightly brings forward the ability of the Secretary of State to withdraw water abstraction licences in an effort to protect the natural environment after 2028. This is vital to protect biodiversity, especially in times of water shortage. I urge the Government to continue and further develop a water resource management grant scheme so that growers and farmers are less reliant on water sources from their surrounding environment, and so that as a nation we are resilient in times of drought.

The Bill brings a sense of hope. It is the foundation from which we can develop a comprehensive environmental policy that will enable us to meet our net zero target. The sooner we act, the sooner we can become a world-leading net zero economy.
The water abstraction and pollution provisions are equally welcome, but I have concerns that the Bill does not properly address water quality testing. The existing regime is not fit for purpose. In my own constituency, the Marine Management Organisation has offered a licence for dredging. The waste is to come from Exmouth harbour to Sprey point in Teignmouth. My concern is that the parties affected were not properly consulted—there is no statutory duty to consult—and that the concordat that is supposed to ensure they agree simply does not work. There is no joined-up action. We need proper statutory consultation and a process to get people working together.

The water quality standards, which are set by the Centre for Environment, Fisheries and Aquaculture Science, were woefully inept at dealing with my problem. When measuring samples, it looked only at 1.5 metres in depth, but the dredging was to take place much deeper. Likewise, the extracts were not analysed; in fact, they contained clay and silt, not just gravel. The Government need to consider proper mechanisms to review the decisions of bodies such as CEFAS and the MMO, because, if they are left as they are, poor decisions will be made that, in my constituency, could impact tourism and beach quality. Natural England and the Environment Agency do not use even the powers they have. The Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 requires an environmental assessment—in my case, we have seahorses—but that has not happened. The EA did not look properly at some of the blue flag and other quality issues.

Air quality is also key. Two towns in my constituency are currently over the limit. Clearly, we need to measure more, so I am glad that we will be measuring more of the pollutants, but we need more clarity about how this will be delivered. We also need to recognise the importance of local authorities in providing support. Many, including mine in Teignbridge, want to be carbon neutral, but they need Government assistance. There needs to be a joined-up plan. Let us help them, and let us help local generation. Regen is trying to do this in the south-west, but the Government do not seem to be playing ball and allowing bodies such as fire stations and hospitals to benefit from having solar panels and so on. We need a clean air Bill.

So well done, Government. This is a groundbreaking start, but unless this action is joined up, we will not succeed. I also put in a final plea for young people to be involved. The previous Prime Minister established a group to properly review this, but it has never met, and many of my constituents from Torquay Grammar School have gone viral on YouTube because they want it to happen.
Of these, I consider the creation of the Office for Environmental Protection to be a most important step forward. As we know, this new and—incidentally—world-leading regulator will scrutinise policy and law, investigate complaints and take enforcement action when necessary, and about time, too.

These actions and powers will be used to ensure that we leave the environment in a better condition than we found it. As the Secretary of State said, we will be the first generation to do so, and I am proud of that. While the OEP will be a national body, however, we must also focus on the individual to reduce our collective impact on the environment. Encouragingly, the Bill does that in several ways, especially when it comes to tackling plastic waste. No doubt plastic waste is a global problem. I believe that recycling and reusing plastic products should be central to any response. Concerningly, the numbers are not good. Of the 6.3 billion metric tonnes of plastic waste ever discarded, only 9% has been recycled. That is, of course, a worldwide figure and this is a truly global problem, but our “use once and discard” approach to unrecyclable plastic cannot have helped. It is good news that plastic straws, drink-stirrers, cotton buds and the like will be banned from April 2020, but there is so much more to do.

I am pleased that the Bill builds on that ban by making packaging producers liable for the full net costs of dealing with their products at the end of life—a financial penalty that should lead producers to begin to design their products with reuse and recycling in mind. If we do this, we will get our approach to plastic packaging right, which is crucial given that, of the 5 million tonnes of plastic used in the UK every year, nearly half is packaging.

The Bill also introduces, or reintroduces—I remember finding them well—deposit return schemes, which will further reduce our plastic waste output. Those schemes are proven internationally, as I saw during a recent visit to Berlin. They will increase recycling and reuse, and reduce littering.

As for consumers, I believe that the Bill will start to change our approach to plastics. Primarily, it will be influenced by the new charge for single-use plastics, which seeks to mirror the success of the plastic bag charge that led to a 90% decrease in plastic bag use. I have no doubt that, because of that new charge, we will reduce our dependence on single-use plastics, or find a sustainable alternative. These changes will almost certainly lead to a tangible reduction in our plastic waste output. As someone who has spent many hours trawling the Walton backwaters in my wonderful Clacton constituency and picking up plastic flotsam and jetsam, I could not be happier. Our water is precious.

We led and engineered our way into our present position. It is not beyond the wit of man to engineer our way out, and I believe that it is incumbent upon us in the UK to lead that way out.

9.26 pm

Bim Afolami (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): I rise—and I think that virtually all Members on both sides of the House have risen—to support the principles of the Bill. It is a groundbreaking Bill which will enable us to make long-term environmental improvements between 2025 and 2030, generational improvements that will make our country better, cleaner and safer for all of us for many years to come.

As I read the Bill, I noted ways in which it would improve the lives of my constituents, and I thought that the Minister would be interested to hear about them. The first involves air quality. At last there will be a legally binding target in relation to fine particulate matter, and in my constituency that will help us with the work that I am doing to establish clean air zones around schools. It will also help the fight against the expansion of Luton airport, which would mean much fine particulate matter in some of the most rural parts of my constituency.

The Bill will also improve waste resource management. As any Member who represents a rural constituency will know, fly-tipping is a scourge in rural areas. In my constituency, the work that will be done by local regulators and local authorities will strengthen the fight against it.

The Government clearly envisage a change in our economic model. A more circular economic model will enable us to keep our resources in use for much longer. Not throwing those resources away quickly will benefit all of us in the long run, and will also help our economy. Let me give a shout-out to some young guys in my constituency who have set up a business called @BambuuBrush, which makes 100% biodegradable toothbrushes containing no plastic. I urge every Member to buy them, because they are really good, and they are great for our environment. That is the sort of business that the Bill will strengthen.

The Bill will also improve water management. The chalk streams in my constituency, such as the River Mimram, will benefit from it, because the Government recognise the need to reform abstraction licensing so that we can help chalk streams to improve and thrive. I am working closely with the Ver Valley Society, and I hope to continue to do so over the coming weeks, months and years, with the Government’s help.

The last thing I will say is about nature. Biodiversity net gain as a concept is groundbreaking: it is important and it helps us deliver more housing more sustainably over the long term and helps our wildlife. I think all of us can recognise that, and a very good example again happens to be in my constituency. The Heartwood forest, built by the Woodland Trust just north of the village of Sandridge, is a very good example of the sort of new forest that could be envisaged and helped and strengthened by the measures in the Bill.

In her summing up I hope that my hon. Friend the Minister will comment on the climate change conference I held recently in my constituency at Rothamsted Research in Harpenden. It was attended by well over 150 people, including experts and constituents, who came up with some of the very measures that we now find in this Bill.

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Time is up.

9.30 pm

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): It is always sad to see my hon. Friend the Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami) cut off in full flow, but full flow is what is happening to parts of the River Severn close to my constituency of Gloucester, and therefore this debate on the environment comes at a very appropriate time.

Earlier in the debate we heard various Opposition Members make a number of complaints about the Bill. There are of course two ways for the Opposition to
criticise any Bill: the first is to say, “This is a missed opportunity”; and the second is to say, “It hasn’t gone far enough.” The second, of course, normally comes with a corollary along the lines of, “The targets should be tougher; Britain can be more ambitious; we would have done it better.” But to be fair, today the shadow Minister acknowledged that this Bill is incredibly important in a whole number of ways and does some groundbreaking work in terms of establishing targets on water, air, plastics, biodiversity and so on. It is the first time in our country’s history that we have tried to be this ambitious and tried to tackle these things with genuine measures that will be measured by a new Office for Environmental Protection. I think everybody across the House recognises that that is a significant step forward.

So this is a vital Bill that tackles some key areas and has some Select Committee input. There is much to applaud, but it would be disingenuous to pretend that there is not always something more that could be done. Therefore, let me first commend the Government and, secondly, say to Members of the Opposition that those who criticise the Government for their environmental performance need to look at the world’s environmental performance index. We have moved from 12th in 2016 to sixth in 2018, and during the four years from 2014-18 the amount of coal produced for electricity went from 30% to 5.4%. Those are remarkable statistics.

What are the areas where we could do better? First, it would be practical for the Government to recognise that there is widespread support across the House for the principle of non-regression in environmental standards, so I hope that that will be changed in the next stage of the Bill. Secondly, the Government have an opportunity to go much further in their approach to some forms of energy generation. For example, we should simply drop the idea that fracking is ever going to happen in this country: I do not think there is support for it; I do not think it is practical; and I think we should recognise that.

Then there is the business of onshore wind. We should at this stage establish two different tiers of contracts for difference and auctions for green energy. We should have onshore wind and offshore in tier 1. Then we can allow marine energy to bid for, as it were, the more innovative and newer sources of energy under tier 2. That would be a great step forward for green energy sources.

I also think that, as the Transport Secretary has suggested, we could bring forward the date for getting rid of diesel cars, but we will need incentives to do so for all of us, and incentives to buy electric cars as well. That, in turn, will trigger a planning requirement for electric charging points, which I hope the Government will be looking out for from all local authorities. We will need more powers on air pollution for local authorities as well, and ultimately we will need a Minister to bring all these things together and be responsible for the net zero carbon targets. I can think of no better candidate than the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster, once he has fulfilled his current obligations on Brexit.

Lastly, it would be wrong not to mention the ecopark in Gloucester, which I hope very much to develop with Enerva, the owner, the Gloucestershire Wildlife Trust and other interested parties, with solar panels, biomass, huge numbers of new trees and a biodiversity park as well. I hope the Secretary of State will support this, with a little bit of help from Government.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. May I suggest three minutes each for the next two speakers?

9.34 pm

Mark Pawsey (Rugby) (Con): Thank you, Mr Deputy Speaker; I shall be as brief as I can.

I welcome the provisions in the Environment Bill, and I particularly want to talk about the move towards a circular economy in which products and materials are reused and recycled. I will focus particularly on the provisions in respect of plastics, and I want to talk about them from a different perspective—that of someone who spent 25 years in the packaging industry and who is currently the chair of the all-party parliamentary group for the packaging manufacturing industry. The industry has not been oblivious to its responsibilities in protecting the environment, and that represents a sea change compared with the attitude that existed a few years ago. It is committed to measures to simplify the process and to investing in innovative sorting and recycling.

I want to talk briefly about the practical considerations relating to four of the Government’s proposals. On the extended producer responsibility, we must remember that in addition to our producers being responsible, consumers must be responsible. It is not businesses that put packaging in the wrong place and cause problems; it is individuals. We must consider that. In respect of taxing packaging products that do not contain at least 30% recycled content, we need to be careful with medical products, which are not allowed to contain recycled material. It is also worth noting that 85% of plastic packaging is being recycled anyway.

The deposit return scheme is an area of some concern, and I hope that the hon. Member for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock) will recognise the benefit of a UK-wide system rather than wanting Scotland to go off on its own. Britvic in my constituency manufactures soft drinks, and it does not want to have to carry two sets of stock for two different markets. That would have an effect on consumers through prices. I also request the Minister to ensure that our home kerbside collection schemes are consistent across the UK, because the confusion between different authorities is restricting the amount that is being collected. There are many other points I would like to make, and I hope that I will have the opportunity to make some of them in Committee.

9.36 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I welcome the Bill and will briefly home in on three issues. The first is the Office for Environmental Protection, which in some respects is equivalent to the Committee on Climate Change. It is a good idea, but for the OEP to be as effective as the CCC, it must have teeth and independence. I ask the Minister to consider two improvements in order to achieve this. First, will she consider introducing a duty to achieve five-yearly interim targets similar to the carbon budgets set out in the Climate Change Act 2008? Secondly, will she commit to a principle of non-regression in environmental standards?
My second point relates to air pollution, a problem that is creating significant health challenges in Lowestoft. The Bill provides a framework for removing this blight by setting a legally binding target to reduce fine particulate matter. Consideration should be given to being more ambitious and making a commitment to achieve the World Health Organisation’s current limit values, as well as to giving further powers to local authorities to tackle local sources of air pollution.

My third point relates to the need to empower local communities, and it is important that the Bill does this. In and around Lowestoft, there are some environmentally rich and diverse areas that are bringing, and could bring, much benefit to nearby residents and local people. These include Bonds Meadow, an historic landscape in a now urban area run by a local community group, and Carlton Marshes, an exciting and ambitious project promoted by the Suffolk Wildlife Trust to recreate a unique Suffolk—not Norfolk—broads landscape right on the edge of the town. There are provisions in the Bill that will promote and help such initiatives, including the strengthened duty on public authorities to take account of biodiversity in their decision making, and the empowerment for local authorities to produce local nature recovery strategies. These measures are to be welcomed.

In conclusion, this is a good Bill with plenty of good proposals. We have heard them described as groundbreaking; I will call them innovative. Let us get on and give the Bill a Second Reading, then work together to make it even better: a great Act that stands the test of time.

9.39 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Members have made many excellent speeches. Unfortunately, time has been far too short for everybody to say everything they wanted, but I want to highlight a few of the points that were made. The hon. Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish) questioned how the Office for Environmental Protection would hold the Government or other public bodies to account, and that sentiment was shared by the right hon. Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) and the hon. Members for Newton Abbot (Anne Marie Morris) and for Waveney (Peter Aldous).

My hon. Friend the Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh) described how far we have come as a member of the European Union and talked about the danger of regression from EU standards. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) pointed out that having due regard to standards does not constitute accountability. The hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) talked about the need for objective information, which is so important if people are going to make these provisions stick. My hon. Friend the Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) talked about the need for more powers and resources for councils. The hon. Member for Gloucester (Richard Graham) talked about it being time to drop fracking, with which I strongly agree.

We had had less than three hours to debate the Second Reading of this mammoth Bill. It is a Bill that covers so many areas in which radical change is needed if we are to deal with the climate crisis and hand on to our children an environment that is fit to live in. The Government have been promising an environment Bill for years, and we have been demanding it for years. I hope everyone recognises the vital importance of enshrining the environmental protections that we currently enjoy as part of the EU in a British legislative framework that will safeguard that protection when we leave. As the Bill stands, however, it does not afford the environment the protection that it will need if and when we leave the EU, let alone provide a course towards sustainability and net zero emissions, which are critical if we are to survive. There are huge omissions to be filled and huge inconsistencies to be ironed out if it is to have the effect for which so many campaigners and hon. Members have been hoping.

The basic premise underlying the Bill—that we can and must replace the external arbiter of the EU with our own Office for Environmental Protection—depends on the OEP having the independence and the powers to hold the Government of this country to account, to prevent our law and our institutions from undermining our environment, to rule out actions that the Government might want to take and to impose fines for breaches. How can that be done by an OEP that has been appointed by the very Secretary of State that it is meant to be holding to account, without any meaningful involvement from anyone else?

Before EU regulations started to change the practice in this country, we were the dirty man of Europe. It was only because the Labour Government went beyond what EU regulations required that we now have protections that may sometimes go further than other European countries. It is a matter of regret that we will no longer be able to lead on EU environmental protection once we are no longer a member. How much of that protection will survive in the face of demands from US agriculture or multinational chemicals giants while we try in desperation to agree one-sided trade deals with much larger economic blocs?

Timing is another issue. Far too much in the Bill envisages decisions that will not take effect for years. How can we secure clean air for our children when many of the proposed measures will take 15 years to have any effect? There is no indication of the powers or resources that will be needed to take fossil fuel vehicles off our roads, but some 35,000 to 40,000 of our citizens die prematurely every year. This is an emergency, and rapid and radical action needs to be taken now.

On waste, where is the mechanism to end the export of plastic waste to countries that do not have the facilities to deal with it? Where is the commitment to resource our local authorities to enable the recyclable materials collections envisaged in the Bill? Where is the Government commitment to invest in recycling and composting infrastructure in this country? Where is the commitment to reducing waste in the first place? All the initiatives proposed in the Bill appear to depend on the private sector providing the finance, the investment, the facilities and even the administrators and scheme enforcement. Have the Government learned nothing from the fiasco of packaging recovery notes, which have done nothing to reduce waste or boost recycling?

Part 5, on water, makes no firm commitments to reduce water consumption or the carbon use of the water industry. The right hon. Member for Scarborough and Whitby (Mr Goodwill) talked about the improvements made in our water services since privatisation, but there has been a massive increase in the amount of money
that households pay for their water since privatisation. Clearly some of that has gone into improving the water infrastructure, but a great deal has gone into profits for shareholders and massive pay cheques for executives.

Any Government that view the profit motive, rather than the best interests of people, as the most effective driver of policy is likely to see lower environmental standards. Without proper investment in the public sector, we will not achieve the step change that we need in tree planting, protection of our wildlife habitats, waste and resource efficiency, reducing the impact of water consumption or protection from chemical pollution. This Government do not have a good track record in investment in the public sector. They are introducing this Bill because they realise that they have to be seen to be doing something. We will hold them to what they say and use this opportunity to push for amendments that we believe could strengthen the Bill and make it genuinely effective. For that reason, we will not oppose Second Reading.

9.45 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): It is not over-egging the pudding to say that I am genuinely honoured to be closing this debate on what I consider to be a landmark Bill that will transform our approach to protecting and enhancing our precious environment. Importantly, and as the Secretary of State clearly outlined at the start, the measures in the Bill will not just maintain what is in place but enhance it. They will truly enable us to leave our environment in a better place than we found it.

It was tremendously heartening to hear such support for the Bill tonight. I have been an ardent environmental campaigner pretty much all my life, growing up on a farm, studying the environment at university and working as a journalist and broadcaster in this field. However, as a journalist, I began to realise that while one can highlight the problems, the only way to get the paradigm shift that we need on the environmental agenda is to influence policy.

That is where this Bill comes in, and that is why I and everyone working on it believe that it will be so significant. With the shocking decline in nature, which is so starkly obvious, coupled with the impacts of climate change, this Bill is now urgently needed, as Members have said. Leaving the EU gives us the opportunity to grasp the independent framework that will make this world better for us all.

Mary Creagh rose—

Rebecca Pow: I will not give way because I have so little time.

I am delighted that so many stakeholders have expressed their support for the ambitions of the Bill. For example, the Aldersgate Group, a green business group, has said that businesses have backed the introduction of an ambitious and robust environmental governance framework that includes...legally binding environmental improvement targets to support investment in the natural environment over the long term.”

I hope that that gives the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) the assurance that businesses have looked at the content of the Bill. Far from the negativity that we have heard this evening, they see great benefits to the economy from sustainability. Indeed, my hon. Friend the Member for Somerton and Frome (David Warburton) also referred to the business benefits of the Bill. While I am on the subject, I will be very pleased to meet him to talk about the Somerset Rivers Authority, although I will not go into that now because it is quite detailed.

Many of the Members who have spoken are clear about the benefits of the Bill, as am I. We have heard a great deal of positive comments, so I will shoot through just some of them. My hon. Friend the Member for St Ives (Derek Thomas) said that the improvements on biodiversity will help the Manx shearwater. My hon. Friend the Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford), who is a massive campaigner for the environment, talked about hedgehog highways. My right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) said that her children wanted the deposit return scheme. My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) talked about the benefits for healthy soil that the Bill will enable us to deliver. The hon. Member for High Peak (Ruth George) talked about the wider catchment work that we can do under this Bill and other measures. The hon. Member for Newport West (Ruth Jones) talked passionately about the children in her constituency, and this Bill really will introduce things that our children want for the future of their environment.

Many points were raised tonight and I will not be able to get through them all, but a lot of colleagues mentioned environmental non-regression, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton (Neil Parish), who does such a great job chairing the Select Committee on Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and the equally excellent Chairman of the Environmental Audit Committee, the hon. Member for Wakefield (Mary Creagh). I was also a member of that Committee, so I know how detailed her work is.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne) also mentioned non-regression, because there are concerns in this area. I wish to be clear that our EU exit does not change the UK’s ambition on the environment. The UK has no intention of weakening our environmental protections; the Prime Minister has recognised the strength of feeling on this issue and he is committed to a non-regression provision on environmental protection in legislation.

A lot of comments were made about the OEP, not least by the hon. Members for Bath (Wera Hobhouse) and for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who is a passionate and ardent campaigner on the environment. I hope she is really going to get behind this Bill, because she has so much to input.

Like them, my hon. Friend the Member for Waveney (Peter Aldous) raised issues about OEP independence, and it will be independent. The Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee has been asked by Government to conduct a pre-appointment hearing on the appointment of the chair of the OEP, and there will also be a legal duty on Ministers to have regard to the need to protect the independence of the OEP.

Deidre Brock rose—
The issue of resourcing and how the OEP was going to be funded was raised, particularly by the hon. Members for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) and for Edinburgh North and Leith (Deidre Brock). The OEP will have the resources it needs to hold the Government and other public authorities to account—that is absolutely essential. Under the Bill, the Secretary of State is required to provide the OEP with sufficient funding to enable it to perform its functions. It has to be properly functioning, otherwise it will not work, and it needs to work. The OEP will also have a five-year indicative budget that will be ring-fenced for each spending review period, giving it a long-term financial outlook and security.

The issue of fines was also raised, with various Members, particularly the shadow Secretary of State, saying that the OEP cannot leverage fines. I value her comments hugely. We had a very constructive meeting the other day and I honestly hope we will work very constructively in Committee, as I know we will. Fines will be unnecessary in our domestic framework once we leave the EU; they would simply shift resources away from the environment. We want the money to stay on the projects—on the environment. There are clear requirements in the ministerial code for Ministers to comply with the law, including court orders.

Targets were another area mentioned by many Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for Tiverton and Honiton, and the hon. Members for Bristol East, for Brighton, Pavilion and for Newport West. Clause 10 requires the Government to set five-yearly interim targets and report annually on whether the natural environment has improved and whether progress has been made on these vital targets. So a real structure is in place to make sure that we meet these targets and that improvements are being made. If they are not being made, there will be recommendations on how they should be made. That is very strong and important.

Air quality was rightly mentioned by a number of Members, and air quality targets are in the Bill. The Government are committed to evidence-based policy making, and we therefore want the target to be ambitious and achievable. It is crucial that Parliament and stakeholders have a chance to comment on the process of developing this target. I met Dr Maria Neira from the World Health Organisation this week and discussed this with her, and she was fully supportive of taking this approach to setting the targets.

A number of colleagues mentioned the issue of engine idling—people sitting in their cars with the engines running. I came across it myself the other day; I had to ask the gentleman to kindly turn his engine off while he was waiting for me to come out for an event. It is an important issue that affects our air quality, particularly around schools when parents are waiting to collect their children. Local authorities can already issue fixed penalty notices for unnecessary engine idling, but guidance is being reviewed and the Government are planning to reissue it to local authorities in the coming months. People are rightly concerned about the issue.

I did not think that I would get through all those comments, so I shall carry on with a few more, Mr Speaker. We much value the experience and expertise of my right hon. Friend the Member for Newbury (Richard Benyon), who has been involved in DEFRA for so long. He mentioned the whole issue of water consumption. The Government recently consulted on personal consumption targets and measures required to achieve them. My right hon. Friend will be pleased to hear that the Government will publish a response in the new year, which will set out intended next steps. We should look at how much water we actually use, aside from water efficiency and any water wastage.

A number of colleagues, particularly my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke, mentioned exports of plastics and suchlike. The measures in the Bill will support local authorities to collect a consistent set of recycling materials. That has been much consulted on and much raised, particularly in the Tea Room—people often talk about why we cannot get enough recyclable plastic material and why more is not used in products. If we had a more consistent collection system and more of the products were itemised, industry would know that it could get hold of particular plastics and use them in its products.

Caroline Lucas rose—

Mary Creagh rose—

Vicky Ford rose—

Rebecca Pow: I will very quickly give way to my hon. Friend.

Vicky Ford: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way on the really important issue of plastics recycling. Does she agree that one of the benefits of the producer tax will be to force manufacturers to put more recycled plastic content into plastic products? That will mean less use of virgin plastics and therefore less use of fossil fuels.

Rebecca Pow: That is absolutely right. There are many measures to encourage the use of more recycled plastic in products. Ultimately, we will get into the producer-responsibility circular economy, in which less plastic is actually made in the first place.

Caroline Lucas rose—

Mary Creagh rose—

Rebecca Pow: I am going to conclude now.

The substance of this debate is the greatest issue of our time. The Environment Bill will make a much needed step change to protect and enhance our environment. I am sorry that I have not been able to deal with every single comment, but I will be happy to meet colleagues later—my door is always open. There are big ambitions in the Bill, and rightly so. We must talk about all the issues in Committee, and I hope that everyone will join in. This is a transformative Bill that will give a whole new approach to environmental protection and enhancement.

I hope that colleagues will indulge me for a couple of moments. I just wanted to mention the fact that, this summer, my husband died. He knew that I had personally campaigned on this environmental agenda pretty much all my life. I believe that he would be very proud to see the Government putting the environment at the top of the agenda, with what I hope will be cross-party support.
I very much hope that, as the Bill passes through its various stages, we will eventually all be singing from the same hymn sheet—recycled, I hope. I commend the Bill to the House.

Question put and agreed to.
Bill accordingly read a Second time.

ENVIRONMENT BILL (PROGRAMME)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 83A(7)).

That the following provisions shall apply to the Environment Bill:

Committal
(1) The Bill shall be committed to a Public Bill Committee.

Proceedings in Public Bill Committee
(2) Proceedings in the Public Bill Committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion on Thursday 19 December 2019.

(3) The Public Bill Committee shall have leave to sit twice on the first day on which it meets.

Proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading
(4) Proceedings on Consideration and any proceedings in legislative grand committee shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour before the moment of interruption on the day on which proceedings on Consideration are commenced.

(5) Proceedings on Third Reading shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion at the moment of interruption on the day that they are commenced.

(6) Standing Order No. 83B (Programming committees) shall not apply to proceedings on Consideration and up to and including Third Reading.

Other proceedings
(7) Any other proceedings on the Bill may be programmed.—(Nigel Huddleston.)

Question agreed to.

ENVIRONMENT BILL (MONEY)

Queen's recommendation signified.

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Environment Bill, it is expedient to authorise the payment out of money provided by Parliament of:

(1) any expenditure incurred under or by virtue of the Act by the Secretary of State; and

(2) any increase attributable to the Act in the sums payable under any other Act out of money so provided.—(Nigel Huddleston.)

Question agreed to.

ENVIRONMENT BILL (WAYS AND MEANS)

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 52(1)(a)),

That, for the purposes of any Act resulting from the Environment Bill, it is expedient to authorise:

(1) the imposition of requirements to pay sums in respect of the costs of disposing of products and materials;

(2) the imposition under or by virtue of the Act of fees and charges in connection with—

(a) the exercise of functions, and

(b) biodiversity credits.—(Nigel Huddleston.)

Question agreed to.

DEFERRED DIVISIONS

Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 41A(3)),

That, at this day’s sitting, Standing Order No. 41A (Deferred divisions) shall not apply to the motion in the name of the Prime Minister relating to an early parliamentary general election and the motion in the name of Secretary Julian Smith relating to the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019.—(Nigel Huddleston.)

Question agreed to.
Business of the House

10 pm

**The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg):** With permission, Mr Speaker, I should like to make a short statement regarding the business for tomorrow.

Tomorrow, the House will be asked to consider a business of the House motion followed by all stages of the early parliamentary general election Bill. I shall also make a further business statement tomorrow regarding the business for the rest of the week, but I can assure this House that we will not bring back the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill.

**Valerie Vaz** (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the statement. Can he say whether the Bill will be published shortly, or, in fact, when it will be published, and when it will be available in the Table Office? Will he tell us the scope of the Bill, and whether any amendments will be allowed?

It is quite strange, because the Government have just voted on a motion under the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, but they now seek to bring forward a different Bill. [Interruption.] It is very strange.

Finally, is this just another of the tick-box exercises that the special adviser has had on his decision tree?

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** As the Prime Minister has said, and as Lady Thatcher memorably said, advisers advise and Ministers decide. Therefore, everything that is decided is the responsibility of Ministers, and that is as it should be. [Interruption.] I am glad that this is creating such hilarity on the furthest reaches of the socialist Benches.

The right hon. Lady asked specifically when the Bill would appear. The Bill will be introduced and published tomorrow. It is extremely short, simple and limited in scope: to have an election on 12 December to ensure that this House can come to a decision—something that it has failed to do on Brexit. It has reached a point of stalemate. It has voted to have an election, but not by a sufficient majority to ensure that the consequences of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act are met, and this seems the best way to ensure that the business that the country wants us to get done can be done.

**Simon Hoare** (North Dorset) (Con): May I ask the Leader of the House what we are to say to constituents and others about the fact that we may be able to find time for a five to six-week general election campaign and then the rigmarole of forming a Government and yet not for bringing back the withdrawal Bill? That is despite the fact that, against all the odds, including my expectation, the Prime Minister played a blinder. He got a new deal and secured for the first time in this House a cross-party majority for it. My hunch is—my fear is—that many people in the country will be slightly perturbed by the course of events that my right hon. Friend has set out before us.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I do not think my hon. Friend’s point is really the right one to be making on this occasion. The withdrawal agreement Bill did indeed achieve its Second Reading, and then lost its programme motion. My hon. Friend will be aware that without a programme motion, or an allocation of time motion coming forward subsequently, the Bill remains simply in limbo. But the reason for not bringing forward an allocation of time motion is that the House has made it quite clear: it does not want to deal or engage seriously with the withdrawal agreement Bill. That means that the only sensible option remaining is to go back to the British people to see what they have to say—to trust the people and democracy, and in so doing ensure that we can stop this stalemate.

**Pete Wishart** (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for this short statement. Scottish National party Members look forward to meaningfully engaging with the piece of legislation that is to be brought forward. We will be scrutinising it very closely in the course of the morning before it is presented to the House. I have just a couple of questions for the Leader of the House. Will we be able to see the draft Bill soon so that we can properly consider it? When will it be made available to us? The date of 12 December is mentioned in the information that I have received from the Leader of the House. Will he explain his thinking behind that particular date? We look forward to engaging with the Government tomorrow, and will look very carefully at what is included in the Bill.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his enthusiasm for an election, and pay credit to the Scottish National party for actually wishing to engage with its own voters, unlike some socialist parties that I can think of—[Interruption.] Other socialist parties; I am corrected.

The hon. Gentleman asks a very specific question about the date proposed for the general election. It is customary, though not established by law, that we have our elections on a Thursday. The reason that the date of 9 December did not work is that it would have required Parliament to dissolve just after midnight on Friday 1 November in order to provide the statutory 25 working days to prepare for an election. That would have made it very tight to get Royal Assent for the Bill that is to be introduced tomorrow, but we also need to pass the Northern Ireland budget Bill before Parliament dissolves to ensure that the Northern Ireland civil service has access to the funding it needs to deliver public services in Northern Ireland. There are therefore technical reasons why that earlier dissolution would not actually have worked. I also think the British people are very comfortable with elections on Thursdays as a matter of routine.

**Sir Patrick McLoughlin** (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): I thank my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House for his business statement. It seems to me that this afternoon we have heard from Opposition Members that they have no confidence in the Prime Minister and no confidence in the Government, but they were not willing to will the means by calling a general election. The Government have taken their decision and are right to do so. Although I was a remainder, the simple fact is that we cannot continue to discuss Brexit forever and a day.

**Mr Rees-Mogg:** My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. A decision needs to be made, and if this House will not make a decision, a new House needs to be formed to make one. That is the absolute bread and butter of our constitution.
Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House give us some indication of whether he intends to lay a programme motion tomorrow? If he does, can he give us some indication as to what the terms of that motion will be?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The programme motion is already in the Table Office.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Mr Speaker, I would like to ask about business other than Brexit, unless you are looking very wearisomely at me. I would like to ask about Huawei, because climate change, Brexit and whether we allow Chinese high tech into 5G are the big, critical decisions that we are going to be making in the next decade or two, but there has been no public debate and no parliamentary debate to speak of on these very important issues. Will the Leader of the House address my point?

Mr Speaker: I am extraordinarily grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who speaks with some knowledge on these matters, is dissatisfied with the amount of debate that there has been. However, his business question suffers from the notable disadvantage that it does not relate to the terms of the business for tomorrow, upon which the statement has focused. However, he has perhaps given an augur of his intent for any business statement that might take place on Thursday, in the course of which I feel sure he will ventilate his concerns further. I hope that is helpful.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I have to be honest with the Leader of the House: when, last week, Parliament rejected the programme motion but not the withdrawal agreement Bill on Second Reading, it was not an invitation to get quicker with programme motions. How can he publish a programme motion for a Bill that he says is going to go through all stages in the House in one day tomorrow but not the details of the Bill so that we can properly scrutinise it? Does he not understand that the biggest challenge that this House is giving to this Government is that we want to see the detail before we do the deal?

Mr Rees-Mogg: This Bill will be so short that it will be very easy to scrutinise in the limited time available. The Benn Act and the Cooper-Boles Act were both passed in a very short time and they were longer Acts.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Over the past couple of weeks I have sat on many delegated legislation Committees that are meant to scrutinise our legislation, and the Opposition have been frequently absent. They were also absent tonight for a whole hour on the debate and no parliamentary debate to speak of. They say they are so interested and need hours for scrutiny, and then, when the time comes, they have run away.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend. It is noticeable that when we had the Second Reading of the withdrawal agreement Bill, there were no Opposition speakers at the end of the debate. They say they are so interested and need hours for scrutiny, and then, when the time comes, they have run away.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Leader of the House has shown himself to be rather skilled at bringing forward impromptu business statements. Therefore, it would not be beyond his considerable grasp of his brief to bring forward a new programme motion for the withdrawal agreement Bill. He says that he is not going to do so. Should the Bill he intends to bring forward tomorrow not pass, will he allow this Parliament appropriate scrutiny and the opportunity to consider, in full and in all its parts, the withdrawal agreement Bill?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I thank my hon. Friend—the DUP still are our friends in many, many ways. Our shared desire for Unionism is very strong, and all our Unionists are friends, if I may say so. However, the House rejected the programme motion, so it seemed to will the end but not the means. Ultimately, this House needs to make a full decision, and it is deeply reluctant to do that.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): In these deliberations, has my right hon. Friend given full consideration to early-day motion 57 in the name of the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field)? Many Conservative Members see this as a way forward, and I would urge my right hon. Friend to give it proper consideration.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his point. It would indeed be a historic occasion if an EDM were actually something serious that could be given proper consideration.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (IGC): In a supreme act of petulance, even though the Leader of the House and the Government got the Second Reading they so craved, they are now deciding that they are so fed up with this—their determination to put a border in the Irish sea is such—that they are just going to ram this Bill through in extra-unusual, atypical time when there is no time pressure requiring them to do so. Will we be able to table amendments before 10 am tomorrow? Will we have sight of the Bill? How on earth can this be a way to effectively repeal such a key constitutional piece of legislation?

Mr Rees-Mogg: It is not repealing a key constitutional piece of legislation; it is amending that piece of legislation to allow, under these exceptional circumstances, for an early general election to take place. That is a perfectly normal legislative process. We legislate to amend Bills and Acts of Parliament the whole time. This is not petulant; it is a decision that has been come to reluctantly because the House will not come to a conclusion, and this House has to come to a conclusion. We have been arguing for three and a half years about this subject in trying to deliver on Brexit—on what the British people voted for. This Government are determined to ensure that that happens, but in a general election others will put forward their case. The hon. Gentleman can try his luck at putting forward his case and will be able to see how well he does.

Sir Bernard Jenkin (Harwich and North Essex) (Con): Can I just enjoy a little gloat? I am one of the few Members of this House who actually voted against the Fixed-term Parliaments Act and warned my then colleagues that many would rue the day they put this piece of
Mr Rees-Mogg: There is an irony, to put it at its mildest, about people who voted for the Benn Act and the Cooper-Boles Act now complaining about undue haste on a Bill that is even shorter. Time is only right when it is the time they have asked for. When it is their time it is perfect, however short. When it is the Government’s time it is always wrong, however long. No, the Government are not treating this House with contempt. This Government, of course, only exist because they command a majority in this House, but this House is treating the British people with contempt. It is failing to deliver on its promises and its manifesto commitments. We must bear in mind that both the Conservative party and the Labour party said that they would deliver on the referendum. That is not happening. Enough—we must go.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I join my hon. Friend in his gloat, because I too opposed the Fixed-term Parliaments Act as it went through the House of Commons. Indeed, I had only just got into the House at that point and was considered to be a rebel for the way I approached it. The lines from Gilbert and Sullivan,

“I always voted at my party’s call,
And I never thought of thinking for myself at all”

did not, on that occasion, apply to either of us.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): The people want us to get on with the job. The withdrawal agreement Bill has passed its Second Reading. We should just agree a sensible programme motion, which is on offer. Why are we not getting on with the job and getting the job done?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Gentleman knows that he is somebody in this House whom I admire and think extraordinarily highly of, but on this occasion his argument falls a little bit flat, because he did not vote for the programme motion, nor did his party take up my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister’s offer to make as much time as available, even sitting 24 hours a day.

What the hon. Gentleman says today does not quite match how he voted last week.

Damian Green (Ashford) (Con): I very much regret to say that my right hon. Friend is being less convincing as he goes on. As he said, this House passed the Second Reading of the withdrawal agreement Bill, which was an enormous achievement by the Government. Surely the fact that the House rejected the programme motion on offer means that the sensible course of action—which, frankly, voters on all sides would expect of us—is to have a different programme motion and put into effect the Bill that has already been given a Second Reading.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My right hon. Friend is rarely and uncharacteristically naive about this. The House did not wish to pass the Bill. It rejected the programme motion, and then the Leader of the Opposition would not take up my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister’s offer of much longer sittings, of 24 hours a day—providing the equivalent, I think, in our terms of 24 sitting days to consider the Bill. That was all rejected, so I fear that those who now object to the course that the Government are taking are not following through the consequences of what happened when the programme motion failed.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): When this Parliament makes a decision, the Government should follow it through—what part of that do the Government not understand? They are again treating Parliament with contempt. This Parliament passed the withdrawal agreement Bill on Second Reading but did not agree with the Government ramming it through in three days.

Today’s programme motion—of which, incidentally, there is one copy in the Table Office—suggests that the entire early general election Bill will go through tomorrow in just six hours. What is wrong with this Government, and why are they frightened of scrutiny?
said that he would make as much time available as the Leader of the Opposition wanted—24 hours a day. Did the hon. Gentleman beg or beseech his leader to accept this offer? Did he knock on the door of the shadow Cabinet and say, “Please, sir, we want some more”? Or did the Labour party just stamp it and ignore it so that it could complain and stop Brexit, because it is a remain party, in spite of many of its Members—including the hon. Gentleman, who nobly voted for Second Reading—representing leave seats?

Sir David Lidington (Aylesbury) (Con): Is not the flaw in my right hon. Friend’s argument that rather than giving to the Leader of the Opposition only the choice about whether he might agree to a particular revised programme motion, the Government should instead have given the House as a whole that opportunity? Is it not the Government’s refusal to give the House as a whole that opportunity that is causing the criticisms that my right hon. Friend is hearing today, and will he not undertake to reflect further on this matter?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I have the greatest admiration for my right hon. Friend, who was a very distinguished Leader of the House and has held so many high offices in the Conservative party. He has been a great servant both of the state and of his party. I am afraid that on this occasion I disagree with him, because such an opportunity was given. The way this House works is that, when allocations of time are given, it is usually discussions between the two main parties that are determinative. This is a sensible way of running things, because then we can have the certainty that is needed.

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I note that the Liberal Democrats are absent from this debate, but perhaps they are in the rose garden having a discussion.

May I ask the Leader of the House why we are going to spend six weeks talking about Brexit in a general election, rather than spending six or 16 days discussing the WAB, which is his Government’s policy?

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am surprised at the hon. Gentleman’s reluctance to face his voters. Surely the most important thing for all of us is to report back to our voters to show them what we have failed to do and ask for a new mandate. Going back to the voters is the right thing to do.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): I feel I cannot be alone in being completely and utterly confused, so perhaps the Leader of the House could just explain this to me. Did the Government pass the Second Reading of the withdrawal agreement Bill or not? Did the Government succeed in winning on their Queen’s Speech? I cannot understand why, after just two weeks, this Government seem to be throwing in the towel, rather than getting this really important legislation through—having the discussions, having the battle and sorting it out here in Parliament where it ought to be done.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for her question, and also for her courage in supporting the Second Reading of the withdrawal agreement Bill. The problem is that the Government’s programme in relation to Brexit was stuck. We had a near theological discussion last week about where the Bill was, and matters concerning purgatory, limbo and the variations according to that and how this could be done. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant) is wagging his finger at me in a schoolmasterly fashion. No doubt if he seeks to catch your eye, Mr Speaker, he will be successful. We had that discussion, and we came to the conclusion that the Bill was not likely to proceed in this House.

Bear in mind that this is not just about what has gone on in the two weeks since the Queen’s Speech; this has to be taken in the context of a House that has consistently said what it is opposed to and has never been willing to say what it is going to accept. As soon as it said it would accept something, it voted down the means of getting it through. This continues the succession of governmental defeats and inability to proceed with their programme. Under those circumstances, it must be right to go back to the voters so that they can select a new Parliament.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): The Leader of the House will correct me if I am wrong—it was before my time—but the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 was introduced to bring stability at a time of crisis. Surely, at a time of real crisis in our country, we should be using our time to explore the options—to take back control, as we were promised. We, as representatives of the public, should be there to scrutinise. What are we asking for across the House—whether it is the right hon. Member for Ashford (Damian Green), the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Sir David Lidington), the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) or others—is more time. Will the Leader of the House grant us more time?

Mr Rees-Mogg: We offered more time.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): It seems strange that the Government are seeking the third general election since the last referendum, when the idea of a confirmatory vote seems so alien to them. However, my question is this: on the off-chance the Government’s programme motion falls tomorrow, will this two-line Bill drift off into obscurity like the withdrawal Bill?

Mr Rees-Mogg: Let us have a question session on Thursday when I go through the business of the House, and then we can discuss whether we should have a debate on parliamentary procedures and Standing Orders as to where Bills go when they do not get a programme.

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): The Leader of the House says discussions have been had, but another programme motion has not been put to the House offering a reasonable amount of time to scrutinise the Bill properly. Anyone would think the Government were scared of that scrutiny and concerned that amendments might be passed, such as one allowing for a people’s vote that actually put the Government’s agreement to the people and allowed them to vote on it. What is the reason for that?

Mr Rees-Mogg: First of all, more time was offered—24 hours a day. We would have gone through the night. That was offered to the Leader of the Opposition, and it was not accepted. It has to be said that if anybody is scared, it is those on the Opposition Benches. They are
terrified of meeting their own voters, terrified the electorate will not thank them for their obstruction of Brexit and terrified that the stalemate that this House of Commons—this addled Parliament—has got into is created by their refusal to deliver on their manifesto promise to deliver on the result of the referendum. We on the Government side want to deliver on the referendum result, and we need another election so that the British people, whom we trust—unlike the socialists—can have their say.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): The Leader of the House dodged this question earlier, so I will ask it again: is the Bill amendable? Yes or no?

Mr Rees-Mogg: All Bills are amendable.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I was just having a quick look at the business of the House motion that has been put down, and there does appear to be some sort of chicanery going on in it. Can the Leader of the House confirm whether amendments will be able to be made in the Committee stage of this Bill? Yes or no?

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I first thank the hon. Gentleman for his most charming remarks earlier to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight)? I think everybody in the House really appreciated the tone and the rareness of it, and you, Mr Speaker, indicated your appreciation at the time.

All Bills are amendable. The stage at which amendments are taken and received is a matter for the Chairman of Ways and Means when it gets to Committee stage.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I just want to put on record the fact that my right hon. Friend the Member for Barking (Dame Margaret Hodge) has been re-selected this evening, despite an appalling attack by members of our party. I am delighted she remains a Labour candidate at the next general election.

Mr Speaker: That is not a point of order for the Chair, but the hon. Lady has registered that point about a senior, long-serving Member, and it is on the record. I thank her for doing so.

Stephen Doughty: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to the question I just raised with the Leader of the House, he indicated that the Bill has not been made available and will be published only tomorrow, which obviously gives Members little opportunity to look at it and to craft amendments in ways that might make them selectable or considerable at the stage at which that is appropriate. Will you confirm, first, that you and the Deputy Speakers will consider manuscript amendments at the appropriate points? Secondly, I make an appeal to you and the Deputy Speakers. A number of amendments have already been discussed today, including votes at 16, which is certainly an issue I would like to address, and a growing number of Members from across the parties wish to support it. Will we have opportunities to put amendments down and to have them considered in the proper way?

Mr Speaker: The short answer to that is yes, that must be so. The Leader of the House indicated that the procedure in this case at Committee stage is a matter for the Chairman of Ways and Means, and others taking the Chair. However, the principle that amendments should be able to be considered is entirely valid. In the light of the timetable, or rather the shortage of notice, it is perfectly reasonable, as far as I am concerned, for colleagues to submit manuscript amendments. I think it would be helpful if those were submitted as early as possible and certainly before the expected start of that proceeding, which the hon. Gentleman and others can guessestimate. Clearly, it would not be until after Question Time and any urgent questions or statements, but it would be wise for Members to press on with the submission of any amendments that they wish to table. Those will and must be dutifully considered at the appropriate time.

Stella Creasy: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Further to your exacting interpretation of what good scrutiny is, I think it is worth placing on record that the programme motion the Government have tabled tonight explicitly excludes amendments being tabled by Members who are not members of the Government and Ministers, because it does not include one of the normal parts of our Standing Orders. Could you, Mr Speaker, perhaps give some guidance to those of us who are deeply concerned to see the Government play this trick yet again, having seen them play it with Northern Ireland legislation in months gone by, on how we might remedy it, so that the House can come to a view tomorrow as to whether changing something as serious as the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 in this way will be done with effective scrutiny?

Mr Speaker: Tabling is one thing; selection for a separate decision is another. If the hon. Lady has a concern about the latter, which I think she has and am advised that she has, then she can table an amendment accordingly in an attempt to protect that potential for separate decision. This has all happened very quickly, but I am sensitive to what the hon. Lady has said, and a view will have to be taken by the Chair as to what is orderly and in the interests of Members of the House.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (IGC): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. There is, in a sense, a developing theme here. I do not know whether you have had sight of the Bill. The Table Office has had no sight of the Bill. The Leader of the House has beetled off, so we cannot ask him about these things and he has not said when the Bill will be available. If proceedings are to start tomorrow at 11.30 am, at what point will hon. Members have the opportunity to actually see the clauses that we are being invited to supposedly amend with only a couple of hours’ capability to do so? May I urge you, Mr Speaker, to please make representations to the Government that they publish the Bill this evening, so that at least we can digest it overnight and try to figure out what potential there is for amendment and where that is necessary? I cannot remember, in all my time since coming into Parliament in 1997, a Bill being not available the day before being rushed through in this way. I do not know whether you can recall such a circumstance, Mr Speaker.
Mr Speaker: I cannot recall such a circumstance, but what I would say to the hon. Gentleman is that it is possible, as I have just been reminded, for the Bill only to be presented tomorrow. However, there is no bar to its being made available to colleagues before then if the Government are so minded. I would add in that context that if the Bill is as short as has been suggested, it should be perfectly possible for it to be made available to Members well before the start of business tomorrow. Given that we are likely to have other business tonight, it would be perfectly possible for the Bill to be made available to colleagues tonight. If the hon. Gentleman is asking me whether I think it would be helpful and solicitous to Members for it to be made available tonight, the short answer is that I do.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Thank you for allowing us to make points of order on this very important issue. The Leader of the House did say that amendments would be allowed at Committee stage. Is it your view that amendments will also be allowed on Second Reading? If they are allowed at Report stage, there will be an adequate amount of time between Second Reading changes, potentially, and laying amendments at Report stage that may be required as a subsequent measure to Second Reading.

Mr Speaker: There are two points there. In relation to Second Reading, I do not have sight of the Bill, but as the Leader of the House pithily responded to one inquisitor, all Bills—or virtually all Bills—are amendable. Is it possible for someone to table an amendment to the Second Reading of the Bill? The answer is that it almost certainly is—I use that caveat only because new precedents can be created from time to time, but I should certainly imagine that it would be possible for an amendment to be tabled to Second Reading.

So far as Report stage is concerned, I simply advise the hon. Gentleman—I made this point to the Clerk of Legislation, who immediately confirmed it—that amendments at Report stage are perfectly imaginable, but there is a Report stage based upon a Committee stage at which amendments have been made. Amendments at Report stage are imaginable in circumstances in which there is such a stage, and that is contingent upon the sequence of events at Committee stage. I hope that that is helpful to the hon. Gentleman and clear to colleagues. I recognise the concern in the House that has been expressed, to which I am sensitive, and in relation to which I think I have given explicit answers.

Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019

10.36 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Julian Smith): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the Report pursuant to section 3(5) of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019, which was laid before this House on Wednesday 23 October.

On 23 October, I published a report setting out the latest position on progress on Executive formation, transparency of political donations, higher education and a Derry university, presumption of non-prosecution, troubles prosecution guidance and the abortion law review. This is the third report published on these issues in line with the Government’s obligations under the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019.

I was disappointed on Monday to have to extend the period for Executive formation to 13 January 2020. I extended the period because the parties have still not been able to reach an accommodation to get Stormont back up and running. Failure to extend the period would have meant removing from the Northern Ireland civil service what limited decision-making power it currently has. That would not be in Northern Ireland’s interest and it would have precipitated an early Assembly election.

While the political parties continue to be unable to reach an accommodation, public services in Northern Ireland continue to deteriorate, hospital waiting lists get longer and frustration continues to grow. I have been in Belfast and Derry/Londonderry in the past few weeks for discussions with all five main political parties. That contact will continue over the coming weeks, as will my close working relationship with Simon Coveney, the Tanaiste, in line with the three-stranded approach.

The issues that remain between the parties are few in number and soluble in substance. It will take real commitment for the main parties to reach a compromise on those issues, but just this weekend, both the largest parties said that they wanted to restore the institutions as soon as possible. I say to the two major parties, the Democratic Unionist party and Sinn Féin: I stand ready to facilitate further talks if and when they are genuinely willing to move forward, but it is a compromise that they must be ready to reach themselves, and it cannot be imposed from this place.

Continued failure to restore the Executive will bring about extremely difficult choices about how to ensure effective governance in Northern Ireland. The Government will need to consider the appropriate next steps, including considering the duty that will be placed upon me as Secretary of State to set a date for an Assembly election.

A restored Executive and Assembly remain the best way forward for Northern Ireland, not least in the light of the UK’s impending exit from the EU. Northern Ireland needs Stormont up and running, a restored Executive and the political leadership that would bring; and I will continue to do my best to make that a reality.

Turning to abortion, I recognise that this is a sensitive and often divisive issue and that we will continue to hear representations from both sides of the debate as we move towards laying the regulations, but Parliament has spoken and the duty under section 9 of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019 has now come into effect, the Northern Ireland Executive having
not been restored by 21 October. Immediate changes to the law have now resulted: sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861 have been repealed and there is now a moratorium, meaning that all prosecutions and investigations that were under way will now be stopped. We have had confirmation that on 23 October the one live prosecution in Northern Ireland was dropped and that the woman is no longer facing criminal charges.

We will consult on the proposals for the new legal framework and the regulations, which are to be made by 31 March 2020. In the meantime, women seeking access to services in England can do so free of charge, with all costs of the procedure, including travel and, where needed, accommodation, being paid for by the Government. Arrangements can be made by contacting a central bookings service, and we have made this number and the services provided known on gov.uk. We continue to engage with health professionals in Northern Ireland and will reach out to the widest possible range of stakeholders to hear their views on the consultation proposals over the coming days and weeks. We are also working with health professionals to ensure that the appropriate services can be established in line with the new legal framework. It is crucial that we get the legal framework right, and we are confident that service provision in Northern Ireland can meet the needs of women and girls.

On the presumption of non-prosecution and troubles prosecution guidance, reforming the legacy system in Northern Ireland remains a major priority for the UK Government.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): On the subject of abortion, it is interesting that the Secretary of State has not yet referred to something that has occurred since he last gave a report: the fact that the Assembly in Northern Ireland did actually meet. There was a petition, and Members did turn up, including all the Members for our party and those from other parties, seeking to do the business of the Assembly and to get a Speaker elected, but others, including Sinn Féin, were not prepared to take part and take responsibility for these decisions. First, why has he not referred to this development? Secondly, does he think that parties that think a lot about wanting to get devolution up and running but that, when there is a legally constituted meeting of the Assembly ready to do business, refuses to participate?

Julian Smith: The consultation paper makes very clear that we have not set a timeframe. We have talked about the period of the troubles ending with the Good Friday agreement, but I am not prejudging the decision. Omagh is one atrocity, but there are many more, subsequent to the agreement, that we will have to consider as well. I want to hear from all victims. I want to hear from people who may not have been involved in a tragedy such as Omagh but whose victimhood may have resulted from their being in prison or being attacked, or as a result of a range of other experiences. I want to hear from all those people, and we will then reflect on what, if any, is the best timeframe for the payments.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): The Secretary of State will know that there have been many detailed discussions about the legacy proposals, including discussions about dates. He will also know, from his time in his current role and also from briefing about events that preceded it, that—as far as I can recollect—all the political parties have been flexible about taking a compassionate approach. I do not think that this should be a controversial issue; I think that we should show compassion.

Julian Smith: I appreciate my hon. Friend’s intervention. That is exactly the approach that the Government will take. We cannot be hard and fast. We must be inclusive. We must ensure that the payment scheme, for which many Members have campaigned on behalf of constituents throughout Northern Ireland, applies to all victims. We talked about the period of the troubles during the consultation, but I was also careful to ensure that we would not be restricted to that and that we would work with Opposition parties to bring about a better definition if we need to define a period that is acceptable to us all.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): While we are on the subject of compassion, may I ask the Secretary of State to clarify the position in respect of the Historical
[Tony Lloyd]

Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill? There is a rumour that the Government do not plan to introduce it in the House of Commons in the immediate future. That may not be true, but it would be a retrograde step, and I should be grateful if the Secretary of State commented on the Bill’s progress.

Julian Smith: The hon. Gentleman is posing questions about business management that I was qualified to answer a few months ago, but I am now in the hands of the business managers. I will say that today’s debate in the other place was extremely moving. The Labour party, the Democratic Unionist party and the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) have been hugely supportive of the Bill. We need to accelerate it and drive it forward, and I will continue to make strong representations, to my successor and to the Leader of the House.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): Will the Secretary of State concede, and agree with us, that if the Government were to win the day tomorrow on an early general election, what he has said just now will not come to pass?

Julian Smith: Well, it is true that if there is a general election there is usually a wash-up period, but in all scenarios I will be making the case that we need to get the HIA Bill through. I am concerned that there are many very vulnerable victims who have been waiting a long time—many of them are over 70 and in ill health—so we need to get on with this. I will be working hard, and if other Members are able to assist me in making representations, I will appreciate it.

Nigel Dodds: I am sure we will be able to come to the Secretary of State’s assistance in that matter. On this extremely important issue, which is a high priority for everyone in the House, is he making representations to the Prime Minister and others about the need to take powers in Northern Ireland more generally, because we are getting a report on a series of issues which during the passage of this Bill were picked out among a whole lot of other issues that were left untouched—the health service, education, investment, jobs, housing, the environment? All of those issues continue to sit in abeyance in the hands of civil servants. The Secretary of State has not so far mentioned the dreaded B-word: how long is he going to continue to wait before the Government actually take powers to deal with all these issues in the run-up to Brexit?

Julian Smith: My right hon. Friend has raised the issue of Westminster’s powers consistently and has strongly represented these views. I believe that the best way to deliver for Northern Ireland is through the Assembly, and I am worried about the consequences that would flow, even though my opposite number has been very generous in offering to help, if needed, on this issue. This is not a good place for us to be; we have to focus on Stormont, and we have to focus on the Executive.

On the issue of legacy more broadly, my ministerial colleague my right hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd) will be beginning meetings with a range of partners, including victims and victims’ groups and members of the armed forces, to make quick and substantive progress on this issue.

We are clear that for colleagues across the House, Northern Ireland political parties and, most importantly, the people of Northern Ireland, we must move forward on this issue with broad consensus but also with renewed pace.

Alongside the substantive updates on Executive formation and the abortion law review, reports were published on the transparency of political donations, higher education and a Derry university, presumption of non-prosecution and troubles prosecution guidance. The section of the report on the transparency of political donations states that the regime in place for political donations and loans is specific to Northern Ireland. We recognise that the issue of retrospection is a sensitive one. While the Northern Ireland (Miscellaneous Provisions) Act 2014 allows for the publication of the historical record of donations and loans from 1 January 2014, we must remain cognisant of the fact that retrospective transparency must be weighed against possible risk to donors.

As we have previously made clear, the only Northern Ireland party that has written to the Government in favour of retrospection is the Alliance party. The Government have said that we will consult the Northern Ireland parties in due course about any future change to the nation’s legislation. For now, however, our focus remains on securing agreement to restore devolved Government for the people of Northern Ireland.

Lady Hermon: I am exceedingly grateful to the Secretary of State for taking a second intervention. Since the Prime Minister seems absolutely hellbent on having an early general election, will the Secretary of State take a few moments to explain how helpful, or not, an early general election would be to his efforts—his genuine efforts—to see the institutions of the Assembly and Executive functioning again in Northern Ireland? How helpful would an early general election be to those efforts?

Julian Smith: I think it is best that I swerve that question. There are some extremely important issues in Northern Ireland that require immediate attention and I want to focus on them with colleagues over the coming days and weeks. Higher education is a devolved matter and any requirement to increase student numbers will require a decision from a restored Executive.

Lady Hermon: I asked the Secretary of State a straight question, and I really do expect a straight answer from this very honourable Secretary of State for Northern Ireland. He is not allowed to swerve the question: he has to answer it directly. He is accountable to the people of Northern Ireland; he is the Secretary of State. We need to know how unhelpful an early general election would be to his efforts to restore the institutions in Northern Ireland.

Julian Smith: I want to focus on the things that need to be worked through. Those things are immediate. Those things require time now, and they cannot be delayed. Therefore, my focus is on trying to work through a whole set of issues over the coming days and weeks.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): It is clear that a general election this side of Christmas is going to lead to an extension of the timetable beyond the end of January for any chance of Stormont to be back up and running.
In the Secretary of State’s mind, at what point will stumps have to be drawn, when energies have been expended and best endeavours have been deployed but success has not been forthcoming? We cannot leave the good folk of Northern Ireland without political direction and new initiatives on health, education and welfare, as the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) said. Where are we going to be on that?

**Julian Smith:** My hon. Friend makes the important point that the extension of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018 comes to an end in the second week of January, so time is of the essence. We need to make the most of this time, and all I can say is that I will do whatever I can over the coming days and weeks to ensure that we get the Executive up and running and that we focus on that as our priority.

**Simon Hoare:** I understand that, and no one in the House will doubt my right hon. Friend’s sincerity in relation to that task or the good faith with which he approaches it. However, in the heat and battle of a general election campaign, there is no scope for those discussions to continue and, dare I say it, this could slightly prejudice the outcome. Were there to be a hung Parliament, or if the Labour party were to be in office, the whole thing would change again. Let us be frank: this early general election is not helpful to the timely restoration of Stormont.

**Julian Smith:** I think I should move on with my speech, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Similarly, the decision on Ulster University’s proposal for a medical school on its Magee campus is a devolved issue, and the merits of the business case will have to be weighed up against all others that aim to address the overriding need for more medical school places. On 17 October, I met a range of stakeholders in Derry/Londonderry, and I am personally committed to seeing what I can do to assist with this ambitious project, which has secured political consensus across the local area. This Government remain open to testing the eligibility of contributing inclusive future funds towards the capital costs of the medical school.

In addition to the matters highlighted in the report, I would like to draw the House’s attention to other matters on which the Government have a duty to legislate—namely, the creation of a scheme for victims’ payments and new laws to introduce same-sex marriage and opposite-sex civil partnerships. As we discussed earlier, on 22 October the UK Government launched a public consultation on the legal framework for a troubles-related incident victims’ payments scheme, the consultation on which will run for five weeks. The UK Government would welcome comments from anyone with an interest or view, to inform the shape of legislation to be introduced by the end of January 2020. We must acknowledge and recognise the unacceptable suffering of those seriously injured in the troubles through no fault of their own, as part of wider efforts to support Northern Ireland in building its future by doing more to address its past.

The scheme is intended to provide acknowledgment to those who are living with serious disablement as a result of injury—both physical and psychological—in a troubles-related incident and to provide a measure of additional financial support. We are consulting on proposals for how such a scheme could be delivered. It is a core element of the Stormont House agreement’s proposals to help address the legacy of the troubles, and it is vital that we make progress across this and related matters. As I said earlier, we are not prejudging any element of the scheme; we are consulting to achieve broad consensus.

Following 21 October, a further duty in relation to providing for same-sex marriage and opposite-sex civil partnerships in Northern Ireland has also come into effect. The Government will ensure that the necessary regulations are in place by 13 January 2020, so that civil marriage between couples of the same sex and civil partnerships for opposite-sex couples can take place in Northern Ireland. From that date, we expect that couples will be able to give notice of their intent to form a civil same-sex marriage or opposite-sex civil partnership to the General Register Office for Northern Ireland. Given the usual 28-day notice period, the first marriages should be able to take place in the week of Valentine’s day.

Following concerns raised by the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn) about the timing of a consultation on conversions from civil partnerships to same-sex marriage and marriage to opposite-sex civil partnerships, we are exploring whether we can consult shortly with a view to delivering the regulations as closely as possible to the previously mentioned regulatory timetable. Regulations to enable religious same-sex marriage ceremonies and to provide appropriate religious protections will also follow shortly, allowing a period of consultation so that the regulations can be tailored appropriately to the particular needs and circumstances of Northern Ireland.

**Madam Deputy Speaker,** I thank you and the House for your patience with this speech. I hope that I have made clear my undiminished commitment to see Stormont back up and running again. Northern Ireland needs its own locally elected representatives making decisions on local issues and making Northern Ireland’s voice heard across the United Kingdom.

11.2 pm

**Karin Smyth** (Bristol South) (Lab): There is a large degree of agreement with much of what the Secretary of State has said, as he has already intimated. He was busy over the summer meeting individual party leaders, and it would be helpful to know when he expects all parties to come together for a plenary to take forward Executive formation, because there has not been one since last July. He may be able to come back to us on that.

On medical places provision, I also visited the campus at Derry/Londonderry. Developing medical training places locally is hugely important to help with the situation in Northern Ireland. It would be helpful for the House to understand where the real hold up is and to start working on an assessment to progress matters. There is a clear need and a political agreement on the ground to try to make that happen.

In the short time available, I will concentrate my comments on abortion law reform. The report contains a heading, “Provision of termination of pregnancy services after the interim period”, which I expected to outline how the new service would look after March, but it actually talks about—we hear this consistently...
from the Government—a medically based legal framework. I would like the Secretary of State to be able to explain exactly what that medically based legal framework is and why it is required.

This is already a highly regulated area of health service practice. In addition to the Criminal Justice Act (Northern Ireland) 1945, regulations apply in a number of areas. First, consent must be given by a woman or else a termination would be criminal—all medical procedures rely on the principle of consent. Secondly, England and Wales have the Care Quality Commission, and Northern Ireland has the Regulation and Quality Improvement Authority, which registers and inspects hospitals, GPs and independent providers. It has the power to suspend or cancel registrations, prosecute, set out special measures and undertake inspections of facilities.

Thirdly, clinicians are governed by their own professional standards. They have to ensure that they have fitness to practise, they have a duty of care, there are clear complaints and litigation processes, and both the General Medical Council and Nursing and Midwifery Council service standards must be adhered to.

Finally, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence is responsible for developing clinically appropriate treatment regimes for all areas of medical care and controls on the sale and supply of medicine.

I am not a lawyer, but before entering this place I spent most of my professional career over the last 25 years in the NHS, planning, commissioning and monitoring healthcare services. I accept that there are issues to be clarified in the new regime, particularly around conscientious objection and ensuring that women, including doctors and nurses, who seek an abortion service are perhaps offered services away from home for the purposes of anonymity, which might be an issue, particularly in rural areas. I accept that, but the Secretary of State needs to be clear about what exactly he considers to be the legal gaps and to consider how, in the absence of an Executive, women in Northern Ireland can be assured that a high-quality medical service is being planned, how it will be delivered and how it will be monitored.

New healthcare services are introduced all the time across the UK. Indeed, in my professional experience, doctors are always complaining that managers stop them developing new services. The basic process for planning and introducing a new service is fairly straightforward. It has patients and the public at its core. There needs to be an assessment of need in the given population, a projection of the numbers requiring the service, with the case mix and the requirements for tiers of specialism. There needs to be an understanding of what the referral process is, and the planners need to look at the workforce and facilities requirements.

In England, we learned the lesson a long time ago that women should not be seen within a general obstetrics and gynaecology service, and the service for terminations is largely carried out by specialist providers. We need to know whether the Department of Health in Northern Ireland is undertaking that needs assessment. What is the estimation of numbers? What are the expected workforce and facilities requirements? How and where are women to access the service? What is the development of a referral process for women requiring either a medical or a surgical intervention?

Additionally, health is one of the six original core areas of north-south co-operation on the island of Ireland, as part of strand two of the Good Friday/Belfast agreement. Following the mapping exercise that recently took place as part of the Brexit process, a report was finally published in June, after some time of asking. We learn from that document that the exercise recognised that “the size, population and geography of the island of Ireland mean that economies of scale for certain specialised services only exist at an all-island level or, for certain regions, on the basis of North-South cooperation. This means that, in a number of fields, in the absence of North-South cooperation, patients and health services would be directly affected. North-South cooperation and EU frameworks also support the continuity of care and of supply of health products, such as medicines and medical devices.”

This is an important area, so have the Government or health officials in Northern Ireland started talks with their Irish counterparts and counterparts in Britain about how women access highly specialised services?

In the last two years, as a member of the British-Irish Parliamentary Assembly’s committee D, chaired by Lord Dubs, I have participated in evidence-taking on abortion services across the jurisdictions of Britain and Ireland. We have taken evidence in Liverpool, London, Belfast and Dublin. I commend our report, which we have just produced, to the House. We considered a number of cross-jurisdictional issues, including the impact of changes to the law in Ireland, the cost of travel, the impact on women with low economic resources, and the treatment of foetal remains and the particularly traumatic and unpredictable process that women currently have to go through. There is a lack of specialist skills across all jurisdictions, particularly for women beyond 18 weeks, and an issue with the online availability of abortion pills.

These issues are testing health services across Britain and Ireland. We can learn lessons from each other, and we need co-operation. There is a need for designated centres across Britain and Ireland. We need an assurance that the Government are progressing and giving clear guidance to officials in the Northern Ireland Office and the Department of Health on the work required to deliver this service.

In conclusion, it is not clear to us what additional legal requirements are needed or for what purpose. Will the Secretary of State say, either today on the record or by committing to bringing this forward in the next report, what legal gaps the Government think need to be filled? Will he confirm that the Northern Ireland Office and Department of Health are now planning the introduction of this new service along the lines I have outlined: by undertaking a needs assessment, an estimation of the demand and case mix, and through the provision of staff, facilities and a clear referral process for women to meet their health needs? Will he outline what discussions his officials will be having with their counterparts across Britain and in Ireland about access and referral pathways to specialised services? Will he commit to bringing back to this House, in this report, or by a ministerial statement, a clear account of how the devolved Department of Health is developing this service in a way that allows some public scrutiny for the women of Northern Ireland?

11.10 pm

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): My hon. Friend the Member for Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East (Stuart C. McDonald),
to whom I am grateful for stepping into the breach to cover me the last time this was discussed, called for compromise from all parties across Northern Ireland and an end to the “vacuum” at the “heart” of Northern Ireland politics. Two weeks on, we are still no closer to that vacuum being replaced with the fresh air that a restoration of the Assembly would provide, not just to the people of Northern Ireland, but to all the people of these isles, who have missed the views of a democratically elected body in the Brexit debate that should have had its voice heard. I mean no disrespect to Democratic Unionist party Members here tonight, but they represent only one strand of opinion on Northern Ireland’s position in Europe.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): So do you in Scotland—

Gavin Newlands: Indeed. There are other views crossing communities in Northern Ireland. A new poll, published in The Sunday Times this weekend, found that 72% of people in Northern Ireland would now vote to remain in the European Union, which is significantly up from the 56% who originally voted to remain. I see the same figures on the doorstep in Scotland. As in Scotland, it is clear that as this Brexit debacle has gone on people have reinforced their view that the benefits of the European Union far outweigh the fantasy Brexit offered by the Tory party. I hope that the restoration of the Assembly will once again give a voice to all the disparate shades of opinion that have thus far been without that voice and, even at this late stage, give a platform for the complexity of opinion on Brexit to be given a voice through Stormont.

Nigel Dodds: The hon. Gentleman talks about people having a voice, but of course seven elected Members of Parliament do not take their seats. It is not that anyone is stopping them or refusing them, so in his remarks perhaps he could reflect that point. Nobody is preventing anyone from having their say; they choose not to come.

Gavin Newlands: I hear what the right hon. Gentleman is saying, but it has to be said that those Members are elected on that basis and it is not for us to second-guess the voters in Northern Ireland on that basis, regardless of our views on abstentionism itself.

Moving on—

Nigel Dodds: Quickly—

Gavin Newlands: Not at all.

I urge the Secretary of State to think carefully before implementing direct rule, and I welcome what he said earlier on that subject. To reintroduce even an element of direct rule would mean fast-tracking legislation through Parliament, which cannot be a sensible path to take when talking about institutions that took years of hard negotiation and compromise to set up. I hope that the Secretary of State is in constant contact with his counterparts in the Irish Government to ensure that both Governments, as joint signatories to the international treaties that underpin devolution in Northern Ireland, are focused on restoration.

Although Stormont has no voice when it comes to Brexit, Brexit is unfortunately helping to ensure that Stormont continues to have no voice, and it is without question endangering the stability that devolution is meant to underpin and be underpinned by. The Assistant Chief Constable of the Police Service of Northern Ireland is warning that a no-deal Brexit could open up opportunities for terrorist groups; and the Chief Constable himself states that loyalist paramilitary groups may seek to react to the instability caused by a Brexit deal that is seen to threaten the Union and, moreover, that his officers will not police any of the border crossings after Brexit. That is exactly what people have been warning of since the referendum campaign itself. They were ignored and dismissed at the time, yet here we are. I truly worry that, given the current power vacuum, those who seek to further their so-called cause and wreck lives and progress see Brexit as a jackpot. That cannot be allowed. Rather than playing reckless games in Downing Street, the Prime Minister should wake up to the reality of the damage that his Brexit extremism is causing. It is vital that the fragile peace in Northern Ireland is secured and maintained. It should never have been risked by this Tory Government in the first place.

A glance through today’s Belfast Telegraph shows just some of the issues that are being squeezed out: bedroom tax mitigation to expire next March; the impact of substance abuse on victims and their families; victims of historical abuse; people trafficking—all huge and substantial issues for any society to face, but with no debate, no solutions, no legislative action possible in response to any of them. That cannot be right or fair on the people of Northern Ireland.

11.15 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for bringing forward the Northern Ireland Executive legislation and information for us tonight. I want to speak about the issue of abortion; there will be no surprise among people here that I am doing so.

In the past two weeks, the point has been made on a number of occasions that from 22 October there has been no legislation in Northern Ireland requiring that abortions must take place either in NHS hospitals or private clinics. The shadow Minister referred to that as well. Expert legal opinion from David Lock QC, the former Labour MP and leading lawyer in the field of NHS and health legislation, has pointed out that the Health and Personal Social Services (Quality, Improvement and Regulation) (Northern Ireland) Order 2003 regulates only certain types of premises, so does not ban any procedure from taking place outside such premises. David Lock QC points out that that means that if a doctor—or, indeed, someone without any formal qualifications—wanted to become an independent provider of abortions outside of a clinic, they would not be subject to any form of statutory prohibition or regulation at all.

In short, that means that back-street abortions were made legal in Northern Ireland on 22 October, with all the attendant health risks to women. I believe that that is extraordinary—indeed, it is unbelievable. Never before has the law been changed in any part of the United Kingdom with the effect of making back-street abortions legal.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): My hon. Friend will recall that I made a number of these points a fortnight ago. During the passage of the report two weeks ago, the Under-Secretary of State undertook, on the Secretary of State’s behalf, to write to us and outline
Friend agree that having that information with clarity would be most useful in this debate?

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend and colleague for raising that. He is absolutely right. The request was made and the Under-Secretary of State said that he would respond, but unfortunately that has not yet happened. That would have been immensely helpful for this debate tonight.

Even in England prior to 1967, back-street abortions were always illegal. Rather than acknowledging the point, however, the Northern Ireland Office has sought rather disingenuously to point to the Northern Ireland guidance as if it offered protection to pregnant women comparable to that of the law. The guidance, however, has no legal weight unless it is referring directly to statute, and for the most part it is merely saying what the NHS, which is under Government control, will do and making suggestions about what everyone else should do.

The suggestion that there is an appropriate substitute for the law is clearly not true and completely inappropriate, given the important matter at hand: women’s safety. While the Northern Ireland Office can encourage people to act in a particular way through guidance, it cannot require people to act.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way because he has raised this issue before. Let me try to be helpful to the Secretary of State by referring to the guidance that he has issued about this very point. It is simply not the case that there are no regulations. In particular, abortion pills are a prescription-only medicine, the sale and supply of which are unlawful without a prescription, and that is not affected by any of the changes that came into law last week.

The suggestion that somehow there is no regulation of access to abortion medication is misplaced. I understand that the hon. Gentleman has that concern, but if he reads the regulations and looks at the existing medical regulations about abortifacients, he will find that regulation is in place. I hope that the Secretary of State, who probably has not got round to writing the letter to the hon. Gentleman, will find that a helpful intervention.

Jim Shannon: I am very capable of reading the information. The information that I have is contrary to what the hon. Lady has just said.

Emma Little Pengelly: For the purpose of clarification, reference was made to the case in the courts recently. The case included the procurement of abortion pills. It was dropped because of the change in the law around decriminalisation. Does my hon. Friend agree that it is wrong to say that access to these pills is not affected by the change? It clearly is impacted by the change.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention, and for the clarification. In his introduction, the Minister referred to the abortion pills as well.
for every year the victims were abused. If those people had the opportunity for legal redress, the cost for each individual would be between £35,000 and £40,000. The point is that making retrospective compensation payments would probably be a cheaper option, but it would address the victims’ issues.

I will conclude now because others wish to speak. The two issues that I have discussed today are really important: first, the clear impression and opinion of people across Northern Ireland is that the changes liberalising abortion are wrong and should not be imposed on Northern Ireland; and secondly, that compensation for survivors of HIA, including those in the Survivors (North West) group, should be retrospective with a payment for every year they were abused.

11.25 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I rise, as the Secretary of State might expect, to ask him another series of questions about the changes in the law regarding abortion in Northern Ireland, which he knows I feel very strongly about. This Act compelled the Secretary of State to act—from start to finish. A week ago, 50% of what the Act asked the Secretary of State to do came into law, which was to repeal sections 58 and 59 of the Offences Against the Person Act 1861. It has been mentioned already that there was a court case outstanding, and it is worth starting there and talking about the difference made by that 50% of the Act coming into law.

The case involved the mother of a then 15-year-old girl, who was in an abusive relationship. The mother bought her daughter abortion pills online to help her, but when she took her to the doctor was reported to the police under the legal duty to report. It is about removing that legal duty to report; it is not that people who continue to supply abortion pills and are not medically qualified will evade prosecution. It is worth reading into the record the words of that mother who went into court the day after the legislation came into effect and saw the case against her, which had been hanging over her for so long, abandoned. She said:

“For the first time in six years I can go back to being the mother I was, without the weight of this hanging over me…every day…I am so thankful that the change in the law will allow other women and girls to deal with matters like this privately in their own family circle.”

She said that she could finally move on with her life.

We can debate all the technicalities of these issues, but fundamentally last week something of a magnitude beyond any of our individual comprehensions changed for so many people in Northern Ireland when that Bill became law—in that 50% repeal of the Offences Against the Person Act. And, yes, I think this place should welcome that, not least because the case of the mother I just spoke about shows the human impact of that piece of legislation from the 1800s hanging over the lives of women in Northern Ireland.

I am here this evening to ask the Secretary of State about his duty to finish the other 50% of this legislation, and to ask him what happens now. I share the concern that we need to clarify the regulations. I understand that there is scepticism from some about the existing regulations, and I put that down to the shadow Minister, who did a fantastic job of setting out all the existing regulations—and therefore the confidence that many people should have that this is not some free-for-all in Northern Ireland that has happened in the last week—but there is a case for clarifying what the regulations are. That case is being made not least by the doctors who have been writing to the Secretary of State asking for that clarification because, as of last Tuesday, they can prescribe abortion pills.

I think we would all recognise that had this place passed the 1967 legislation for abortion access in England and Wales by saying, “Well, we’re going to say that you can continue to have a back-street abortion, but you won’t be prosecuted if you go to A&E”, none of us would have accepted that as a reasonable position. And yet, at this point in time—because it is not clear how doctors in Northern Ireland can prescribe abortion pills to women in Northern Ireland who wish to use them—we are risking saying to women, “Continue buying them online and not being clear about which providers are safe, but at least now you won’t be prosecuted”, as the mother I described had to deal with for many years.

I would really welcome clarification from the Secretary of State about what he is doing with regard to the doctors who are writing to him asking him where they get the prescriptions from and how they make sure they can give safe advice. To be honest, asking women to travel is not a solution. In the past week, the only message we have been able to give to women in Northern Ireland who now wish to access their right to a safe, legal and local abortion is that they have to travel. If they have family commitments, if they are in abusive relationships or if they do not have the relevant travel documentation, that is not a solution for them.

Emma Little Pengelly: The hon. Lady said that the only advice to some would be to order these pills online. It is very important to outline that the medical advice is absolutely clear that it can be dangerous to take these types of pills without medical supervision. The case that she referred to was a case of abortion pills being procured by a mother for her child where there were complications resulting in her having to present. So, yes, I absolutely agree with the hon. Lady: there needs to be guidance in relation to this but we must also be responsible and say very clearly that we should not recommend the route of buying these types of pills online because people do not know what they are going to get.

Stella Creasy: I completely agree. What I am saying, therefore, is that the Secretary of State now has a responsibility to the women and girls in Northern Ireland who wish to be able to access this right to make sure that there is clarity about where they can get abortion pills prescribed by a medical professional. These changes were never about removing the medical component of abortion, but simply about recognising that it should be a medical rather than a criminal matter.

The Secretary of State will know from the letters that I have been writing to his Department that I am concerned that there has not been clarity for women and girls in Northern Ireland about their rights and how to access those rights in the past week. There needs to be more public information about how to access an abortion, alongside the work to make sure that they can access a safe abortion. He will know of the long-standing concerns that many of us have about the concept of public consultation. While he talks about both sides of the debate, he himself has been clear that what is up for debate is
We know that whether abortion is available in Northern Ireland but how it happens. Many of us consider that to be a purely medical question. Indeed, the legislation required the Secretary of State to do this in line with the CEDAW—convention on the elimination of all forms of discrimination against women—principles.

A week ago, the Secretary of State’s junior Minister—I am sorry, but I am not quite sure of his role—said that the consultation would be published on the following day. We are now a week on. We do not have any of the details of that consultation—what the Government believe they should consult on that meant that any consultation would be in line with the CEDAW principles and would not undermine what this House decided, which is that women in Northern Ireland should be able to access an abortion equally. The Secretary of State talks about consulting the widest range of stakeholders, but he will understand the concern that many of us have about bringing non-medical professionals into the provision of medical services, and, indeed, as the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) has highlighted, the importance of having proper medical engagement.

Let us be honest about this: there is no way a member of a Church community would have the same medical standing as, say, doctors or the royal colleges with regard to the specifics of how a medical procedure is provided. It is absolutely imperative that we have the details of what the Secretary of State thinks he is going to consult on and how he squares that with the CEDAW requirements so that we can be confident that he is not opening a hornets’ nest when it comes to providing the other 50% of this legislation.

It is very important that we put to bed any suggestion that anything has changed in the time limits through what happened last week. The 1945 Act, which the shadow Minister mentioned, is still in place. That is very clear about not changing the viability provisions. People talk about abortions at five months, but that is not what is being talked about in Northern Ireland at all. If anything, modern medicine changes the concept of what viability is to perhaps something that people would consider to be even lower. But there is an issue when it comes to fatal foetal abnormalities and the Bourne judgment. Again, the CEDAW judgment called our attention to how that is interpreted in Northern Ireland, with the concern about how the concepts of the preservation of the life of the mother and of long-term damage were being interpreted. It is vital that the Government address this so that we can be sure that women in Northern Ireland are not being treated differently with regard to preservation of life from women in England and Wales.

We know that the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence clinical guidelines apply, but can the Secretary of State confirm that those will be used to deal with these sorts of issues? While the vast majority of abortions happen before 10 weeks, there are some very sad cases that involve late-term abortions, often for very good medical and health reasons. It is vital, in separating out these two issues and ensuring that people in Northern Ireland have confidence about what this legislation has done and the regulations that the Government will bring in, that those issues are addressed. We know that whether people can access a safe, legal abortion has no impact on the rate of abortion, but we also know that keeping people safe starts with ensuring that they are not criminalised for wanting to make a basic human right choice—to have control over their own body.

I urge the Secretary of State to address those issues. In this interim period, many women in Northern Ireland will need our help and support; I have been contacted by women who are not clear about how to access these services. They have seen that their human rights are finally being upheld, and now they need the Secretary of State to finish the job—which he alone can do, because the legislation was clear that it ultimately rests with him to protect their human rights—that the House asked him to do in July and that came to fruition last Monday.

11.35 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I was encouraged to see that the right hon. Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) takes such an interest in Northern Ireland matters, but then I realised that he and my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) have an Adjournment debate this evening, which is perhaps why he is here.

I do not want to rehearse arguments from a fortnight ago. The recurring nature of these reports means that important issues for Northern Ireland get aired quite often in this House, and there is no need for me to repeat my speech of two weeks ago, but I want to re-emphasise one point to the Secretary of State. Having sought and received an assurance that we would get written confirmation of the questions asked, I think it is discourteous that we have not had substantive replies to those questions and that they were not available for us to share more publicly with those who take an interest in the legislative change around termination and want to be satisfied with the legislative framework in Northern Ireland. Given that the law changed last Monday, the very least we would have expected was a response between the debate and then. I leave that point with the Secretary of State. I do not expect him to have full answers this evening, though he may surprise me; if he does, they would be most welcome.

The second issue that I raised a fortnight ago was the phraseology used in the report around progress on dealing with legacy prosecutions and what the Government are doing in that regard. Today’s report does not say it, but two weeks ago the report said that there had been no further progress on that issue. I highlighted the fact that the Prime Minister had given a commitment to legislate on those matters in response to questions during the debate on the Humble Address. That, to my mind, is substantive change. That is an important aspect that should have featured in these reports, but yet again it does not.

I am grateful that the Secretary of State is here tonight, since he was unable to be with us a fortnight ago. He has, in fairness to him, been engaged thoughtfully and continually in issues in Northern Ireland, but I wish to raise with him my disappointment yet again at the content of this report. He knows full well that, when the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Bill was passing through the House in July, myriad amendments were tabled at various stages, and all of them sought to ensure that reports would be brought forward. Section 3(18)
of the Act says that, by 21 October, prior to the publication of this report, the Secretary of State must bring forward a report on the progress of libel reform. Section 3(19) says that, by 21 October, the Secretary of State must bring forward a report on the progress made on implementing the Protect Life 2 strategy in Northern Ireland—a strategy that aims to equip our social services and health sector to tackle suicide, by providing the infrastructure, scaffolding and support for individuals who find themselves in the depths of despair—yet that does not feature in the report we are debating tonight, contrary to the provisions of the legislation.

We were to receive a report on the hardship unit that was recommended as part of the renewable heat initiative. That is in the legislation and it was due for 21 October, yet it is not here. What is the point of putting down amendments and amending the legislation to require reports if they are not before us and they are not available to us? Subsection (20) states that a report is to be published by 21 October, to be laid before us so that we can discuss it, on the demands for elective care in Northern Ireland and the impact for children on waiting lists. Where is it? It is not here.

I apologise in advance if I have fundamentally misunderstood the phraseology in the Act, but to my mind it is quite clear: reports are to be brought forward by the Secretary of State by 21 October on this range of issues—suicide prevention, libel reform, hardship and the RHI, elective care demand and so on—yet they do not feature. We can come back every fortnight and have the same debate about terminations, as important as that is. My right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), our leader, highlighted that there are many Northern Ireland issues that do not get attention in this place, but here we have a legislative requirement to bring forward reports and there is nothing—nothing. I think it is a dereliction of duty.

The Secretary of State has heard from the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) and my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) about the consultation on a victims’ pension. I do not think anyone who has a heart could fail to have been moved this evening by Claire Monteth, a victim—she lost her brother and her mother was severely injured in the Omagh bomb—who quite rightly makes the point that her grief, which is associated with an atrocity that came four months after the Belfast agreement was signed, should not preclude her or her family from those provisions. I am grateful to the Secretary of State for the comments that he made. He is not going to prejudge the consultation—the consultation is framed as it is—but I think he knows, and would personally and privately accept, that when the consultation responses are considered, this is something on which there will be movement.

I have a couple of questions for the Secretary of State, which perhaps unfairly arise out of the emergency business statement we had earlier this evening. The Leader of the House said that 9 December cannot be fixed as the election date because there is a need to bring forward a Northern Ireland budget Bill. We do not have much time. I am not aware of the engagement that would ordinarily be necessary in advance of bringing forward a Northern Ireland budget Bill, but the House could be rising at the end of this week. We could be dissolved next week, yet there is an indication from the Leader of the House that a budget Bill will need to be passed.

I ask the Secretary of State this: he is not a business manager any more, but does he know when the budget Bill will be introduced? Can he give us an assurance that a budget Bill for Northern Ireland passed this week or in the early part of next week will contain the provisions that he knows are required on co-ownership housing? He knows there is a legislative fix sitting ready and waiting to go on the Office for National Statistics definitions of who can avail themselves of financial transactions capital. Co-Ownership housing in Northern Ireland has been categorised as a private organisation. In every other part of the United Kingdom, there has been a legislative fix with ONS guidelines to say that people can still avail themselves of FTC. This fix should have been done a year ago and it should have done by a Northern Ireland Assembly, yet it has not been done. The outworking of that is that affordable housing and support for people who want to get on the property ladder do not exist—they will go. So can he commit that he will include provisions that will amend the situation in relation to co-ownership housing?

The Act that we are discussing tonight says that the Secretary of State is mandated to bring forward proposals to deal with welfare mitigation. That was agreed by the Northern Ireland Assembly three years ago to remove the worst vestiges of welfare reform in Northern Ireland, recognising that we do not have a housing stock that would allow for the bedroom tax—we simply do not have one and two-bedroom properties for those in larger homes to move into. We have an impending welfare crisis in Northern Ireland.

The Secretary of State is mandated by the Act to bring forward a report on 6 December, but he and his two junior Ministers voted today for an election. When are we going to have clarity around welfare mitigation? The Secretary of State needs to know that 34,000 households in Northern Ireland will be directly impacted by a failure to extend mitigation. We are talking about £12.50 a week or £50 a month. Some 1,500 people in Northern Ireland will lose their protective cap for benefits. Those families are going to lose £47 per week on average, and up to £100 per week, if there is not a fix for welfare reform. The additional resource for advice services will go as well. Given that the Secretary of State was keen to vote for an election and knows he is under a duty to bring forward a clear plan as to how we will extend welfare mitigation in Northern Ireland, will he include that as part of his budget Bill?

Finally—there is one more speaker to come, and we want to give the Secretary of State plenty of time to respond—the Secretary of State mentioned last Monday that he had extended the provisions under the EEF Act. However, he knows he cannot do that singularly. He knows he is under a legislative requirement to seek a positive affirmative resolution for that within 28 days. If this House dissolves and he has not sought that positive affirmative resolution from this House to extend the provisions of the Act, they will fall during an election campaign. Will the Secretary of State therefore indicate when he intends to seek that positive affirmative resolution from the House so that he can extend those powers? Will he do so as part of the Northern Ireland budget Bill?
Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): May I first add my support for the many issues that my colleagues have discussed today? In particular, I want to focus in my short remarks on a number of policy issues that should be being dealt with by the Northern Ireland Executive but that, sadly, are not.

Of course, there are many important issues in the overall reports, and we have heard some detailed discussion of them. In previous debates, I have gone into some of the detail of those issues, but I want to focus tonight on paragraph 3(1), which is on Executive formation, and to spend a little time outlining the impact of the lack of that Executive formation on my constituency, but also across Northern Ireland.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), my party leader here at Westminster, articulated earlier the many issues that are suffering due to the lack of a Northern Ireland Assembly and because the Northern Ireland Government have not been re-formed. The update in the report is very short because, since we last considered these reports, there is still no Northern Ireland Executive.

I was elected to represent the wonderful constituency of Belfast South just in the 2017 election, and it has been an incredible privilege to do so. In many ways, Belfast South is a thriving constituency. We have some of the best schools in Northern Ireland. We have some of the highest employment rates in not just Northern Ireland but across the United Kingdom. We have some of the lowest unemployment rates. At the last count, we had over 19,000 registered businesses. We have an incredibly diverse constituency, with many wonderful institutions, including the Lyric, many arts institutions, the Ulster Museum, Queen’s University and Stranmillis College, to name just a few. Relative to many other constituencies, mine is doing very well, and I am incredibly proud to represent it.

Like all constituencies, however, we still have challenges. The constituents I represent still have very real needs across a whole range of public services from health, education and infrastructure to worrying about bills and worrying about their businesses. I want to touch briefly on some of those issues, because they are the type of everyday issues that are not being articulated in Northern Ireland because of the lack of a Northern Ireland Assembly. They are not being articulated in this place either, because of the nature of the debates. Debates on those issues tend not to include or extend to devolved issues, but they are the issues that are impacting on a day-to-day basis. I know that and my hon. Friends know that, because we listen to our constituents and we know the serious concerns they have. We know the serious detrimental impact those issues are having on their lives. I know that the Secretary of State and his team have been out and about as well, talking to constituents right across Northern Ireland.

I want to touch first on education. Education in Northern Ireland is under huge pressure. The Northern Ireland Affairs Committee took some evidence from a number of schools and headteachers. I went out and talked to schools—nursery schools, primary schools and post-primary schools—across my constituency. They are doing an incredible job at a very difficult time. We know that their budgets are under huge pressure. That is why the Democratic Unionist party, in the confidence and supply arrangement, secured additional money for education. We wanted to make sure that those additional funds went into much needed public services, not for one part of the community but for people right across the community. We knew that schools would be under pressure. We knew there were further projected cuts for schools, and we wanted to do everything we could to help every child in Northern Ireland succeed. It is my party that stood on that platform. No matter where a child comes from, or what their background or financial circumstances are, the DUP wants every child in Northern Ireland to succeed. We recognise that succeeding in education is the gateway to a much better life for people, their families and their grandchildren.

The other area under huge pressure in Northern Ireland on education is special educational needs. There have been a number of debates in this place about autism services and mental health needs, yet for Northern Ireland we have been starved of that debate because of the inability to get the Northern Ireland Executive back up and going. In Northern Ireland, we have some of the highest levels of mental health needs and that is also the case within schools. I speak to parents day in, day out. They are under huge pressure to try to get much needed help and support for their children. They know that their children need everything from getting a diagnosis to getting a statement to trying to get educational support for that child. The Education Authority needs more resources, both financial and in terms of professionals. Parents need more support in their fight to get what their child needs and schools need more resources to provide that support. These are the types of issues that are not being talked about in Northern Ireland. The Democratic Unionist party is committed to a fundamental review of special educational needs to ensure proper resources go into special educational needs for every child across all communities in Northern Ireland.

Jim Shannon: Some 60% of the pupils who go to Clifton Special School, in the constituency of the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), come from my constituency of Strangford. The issue is not just about resources for parents and pupils, but upgrading such schools so they can cope with the new workload. Disabled children have very complex needs, both educational and health. That is the predicament facing schools such as Clifton House in Bangor.

Emma Little Pengelly: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. In my own constituency, we have a number of fantastic schools on the frontline, including Fleming Fulton, Glenveagh and Harberton. They are three fantastic schools in my constituency which do a huge amount of work. Other schools are also dealing with complex needs. I have reached out and spoken to them, and I understand the pressures they are under.

Moving on to health, in one respect we have been fortunate in Northern Ireland in that before Sinn Féin collapsed the Assembly, the Bengoa report, which talked about transformation, was agreed to, so we have a policy framework. However, let me be absolutely clear: these types of issues and pressures are not being articulated because there is no forum for this in Northern Ireland. Health-related matters do not fall to councils. There is...
no Northern Ireland Executive and this is a fully devolved matter, so it is rarely spoken about in detail in this forum, but we need health transformation in Northern Ireland.

We recognise that the current system is not fit for purpose. The Democratic Unionist party is absolutely committed to that transformation in a way that protects frontline services. We want to, and will, stand up for healthcare workers to ensure that they get proper remuneration for their hard work. Nurses, doctors, cleaners and the other staff in hospitals, including the administrative staff and consultants, are all working under huge pressure, and I pay tribute to them and the incredible work that they do in a system that is no longer fit for purpose, puts huge pressure on them and prevents them from getting the remuneration that they really deserve and that people really want to give.

We recognise that as the transformation is undertaken, we also need the additional resources to sort out things such as waiting lists. All Democratic Unionist party Members know how many constituents come in to see us who are sitting on waiting lists that are growing and growing, week by week, month by month. We want to get that investment in parallel with the much needed transformation, so that the money does not just go on transformation when people on the frontline are suffering. We need to reduce GP waiting times and get more GPs into the practices to help them to support our constituents.

I want to touch briefly on the business community. Businesses are rightly concerned about the proposal in relation to Brexit, but I do not want to talk about Brexit in any great detail today, because there will be plenty of other opportunities—and there have been opportunities—to do that. However, many of the issues for the business community in Northern Ireland are the same as those that businesses face across the United Kingdom. I have absolutely fantastic commercial areas in my constituency—everything from the Lisburn Road to Stranmillis Road, to Ormeau Road, to Finaghy Road, and there are many others across my constituency. They are fantastic areas with many small businesses where the business owners and staff are working incredibly hard under difficult circumstances. Our business rates are too high. Our businesses are struggling and they very much need this reform. I welcome the fact that there is a consultation out, but the Democratic Unionist party wants to do something fundamental to support the very many small businesses that are trying to make our economy work and make Northern Ireland thrive.

Our high streets are suffering. There was an announcement on the high streets fund across England and Wales, but we do not have that in Northern Ireland. I wrote to the head of the civil service asking him to use that money because Northern Ireland got a Barnett consequential. It got money from that announcement. Is it going to our high streets? No, but the Democratic Unionist party would absolutely prioritise supporting businesses and making Northern Ireland thrive.

I briefly want to mention the environment. I will not go into a huge amount of detail, but many people in Northern Ireland have one of the lowest levels of woodland cover of any region in the United Kingdom. We have on average 6% or 7% woodland cover. The average across the United Kingdom is 13%, and across the European Union, it is 38%, so Northern Ireland has the lowest percentage of woodland cover by far across the British Isles, the Republic of Ireland and the European Union.

I will conclude with a plea, because I genuinely feel that this needs to be addressed. I have put a proposal on the table: to mark the 100 years of Northern Ireland, I am proposing the creation of a project to increase significantly the amount of woodland cover. One way that we could do this is by planting a tree for every person alive across Northern Ireland and the border counties—approximately 2 million trees. That would bring our woodland cover up from about 7% to about 12% or 13%, which would be the UK average. That project could happen and has happened elsewhere. There are other big initiatives across the United Kingdom, and I ask the Secretary of State to give serious consideration to supporting that proposal.

11.59 pm

Julian Smith: I will not detain the House for long, given the late hour. The hon. Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) made a series of important points. I will read the report she referred to and would like to discuss further with her the important issue of ensuring that the service provision, pathways and operation of this reform are done in the correct and best manner. I look forward to having further discussions about this.

The hon. Member for Paisley and Renfrewshire North (Gavin Newlands) raised several issues, including security. Northern Ireland’s threat level remains at severe, but both the PSNI and the security services continue to play an important role and work extremely hard to protect all citizens in Northern Ireland. He and the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) also raised the issue of welfare, and I am looking at that. It is a devolved matter, but I will obviously be looking at it carefully.

The hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) raised a number of issues about the change to abortion law. Obviously, the repeal of criminal offences relates specifically to the procuring of abortion. It does not repeal other relevant criminal laws that exist to protect individuals. Medical procedures are carefully regulated and have to be carried out in regulated premises with appropriate care and oversight. I know how strongly he feels about this, and I would like to continue discussing it with him and others in the House over the coming months of consultation.

The hon. Gentleman’s second point was about the HIA and specifically the Rosetta group of victims of child sex abuse. I spoke to that group this evening, and they reiterated the point and said they had met him this morning. I hope to be able to provide confirmation that we will be dealing with the issues he raised as we bring in the Bill.

The hon. Member for Belfast East spoke of a missing letter. I can assure him that that letter was signed today. It has not been received by his office, but I will ensure that it is on its way. I am confident that it is. I apologise for the speed of that letter.

The hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy), who has worked extremely hard on this policy, is right to raise the fact that we have now moved into the
shaping phase for the regulations. We are launching the consultation and she is right that we are a few days later than we had hoped, but we will be producing that over the next few days. We are reflecting on the advice from royal colleges and many others, and I would appreciate the opportunity, once we have launched the consultation, of discussing with her how we address the issues she raised about provision and ensuring access to services.

The hon. Member for Belfast East raised the issue of additional reports. Those are in the House of Commons Library. I would be happy to accompany him so that we can read those reports shortly. He also raised the issue of the budget Bill. I have been fighting for more time for that Bill. We need to get that done. It provides the funding and vital services for Northern Ireland. Whatever the next few days hold, we have to get that Bill through. In all circumstances, election or otherwise, we will have to push through the affirmative statutory instrument attached to this extension.

Gavin Robinson: The Secretary of State will have to push that thorough in very quick order. Can he confirm that when he brings forward a budget Bill it will include that legislative fix he knows so well—that of co-ownership—and will he give us some further details about what he plans to do on welfare mitigation?

Julian Smith: I will be updating the House in respect of the first point. Welfare is a devolved matter, but I realise that it is important to Northern Ireland, and over the coming days and weeks I will be working with, and talking to, the Northern Ireland civil service.

My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) raised a range of issues, including education and the Bengoa reforms. If we put more money into the health service, we will have to drive those reforms forward. She also talked about business. I met members of the Orange Order on Saturday, and met representatives of other business organisations today. I will do whatever I can to ensure that Northern Ireland—as well as Yorkshire!—continues to be the best place in Britain in which to do business. Northern Ireland is now covered with city deals. We must drive those through as well as looking at town deals, which were also raised. As for woodlands, I am encouraged by that proposal, and look forward to working with my DUP colleague. I hope that there will not be too many trees in the House over the coming days, but we hope to add more to Northern Ireland in due course.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered the Report pursuant to section 3(5) of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019, which was laid before this House on Wednesday 23 October.

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

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) (No. 2) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 24 July 2019, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.

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

CONSTITUTIONAL LAW

That the draft Government of Wales Act 2006 (Amendment) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 11 July 2019, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Question agreed to.
Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I did some research on this beforehand, and it is not just about the issue of sewerage and drainage disposal, but about access to safe drinking water, which I understand may be a problem in the right hon. Gentleman’s constituency. Does he agree that it is important that people are able to access safe drinking water? In Northern Ireland, the onus is on Northern Ireland Water to provide a safe and accessible supply that can be accessed at any time.

Greg Clark: The hon. Gentleman is an assiduous defender of his constituents’ interests. The fact that he is here after midnight, even on a debate on Tunbridge Wells, to fight the good fight for his constituents is a credit to him. I am giving an example of drainage and sewerage services because it is of particular importance for the reason I will give.

The town of Paddock Wood is situated in a low-lying area quite close to the River Medway that frequently floods. When it does so, the overload of the current network has unacceptable, unhealthy and frankly disgusting consequences for residents.

One of my constituents, who lives on an estate near the centre of the town, described how for 10 years her front garden has been regularly flooded with water containing sewage, toilet paper and other waste, coming up from a manhole cover in the middle of the road outside her property. A resident in a different part of town described how he and his neighbours have submitted complaints time and again about sewage and toilet paper being washed out into their road.

Paddock Wood Town Council and the local borough and county councillors, to whom I pay tribute for their tenacity over the years, have highlighted the problem, demanding that it is addressed and warning of the obvious need for investment in greater capacity.

Southern Water has admitted that the infrastructure needs upgrading before any additional demands on it can be contemplated. In 2015 Southern Water told me in a letter:

“There is current inadequate capacity for any future developments.”

This followed a capacity check carried out by the company in 2014, which established the need for:

“General upgrades to sections of the Southern Water public sewer network”

and “a requirement to increase the capacity of the Station Road wastewater pumping station by approximately 8%.”

Indeed the company’s then chief executive wrote to me, saying:

“It will be our recommendation that the pumping station be upsized before any further properties are built in this area.”

Paddock Wood is now subject to plans for at least an additional 1,000 homes across three major developments, on top of the 3,250 homes already there. Initially, Southern Water’s advice to planners was consistent with its previous statements that the local network was at capacity. On two of the sites—300 dwellings at Church Farm and 375 at Mascalls Court Farm—the borough council informed me that “additional off site sewers or improvements to existing sewers will be required and these details have to be agreed with Southern Water.”

At Church Farm, Southern said:

“We advised the developer that they need to install a parallel storage sewer to cater for additional flows...We will install the sewer under section 98 regulations, which will be funded in part by developer contributions.”

However, as housing development has proceeded in Paddock Wood the promised infrastructure investment has not appeared. Indeed the current chief executive of the company wrote to me in 2017 to say:

“I can confirm that we are not currently in receipt of a valid section 98 application for any of the proposed sites in Paddock Wood.”
[Greg Clark]

The company said:

“We have a legal obligation to connect new developments to the sewerage system and are not in a position to formally object to plans for development.”

Moreover, Southern has written to the council to say that new sites can commence development without the necessary improvements that it had identified as being needed.

Plans to upgrade the sewerage network in Paddock Wood, despite repeated discussions with Paddock Wood Town Council, have come to nothing. Residents of Paddock Wood now see development happening that they were assured would take place only when the sewerage system had been upgraded to deal with the current overuse and problems and to remove the worsening of that situation, let alone to cope with the planned development.

I met representatives of Southern Water, members of Paddock Wood Town Council, and officers and members of Tunbridge Wells Borough Council and Kent County Council on 7 September. All those local representatives were dismayed to discover that the previous plans were not even going to be proceeded with, and that the company had in effect gone back to the drawing board to consider what could be done about the capacity in Paddock Wood.

In the meantime, new homes are being built and connected to a sewerage system that is already so inadequate that it results in sewage flowing through the streets and the flooding of existing properties. Enough is enough. The people of Paddock Wood are not nimby's opposing all development; quite the opposite. In fact the town has, without fuss, accommodated more new development compared with its size than most other towns in the south-east of England. It is perfectly reasonable to demand that, in doing so, residents should not be taken for granted or taken for a ride.

I have focused on the town of Paddock Wood this evening, given that this is a short debate, but a sense of distrust and, in my view, justified scepticism also applies to Hawkhurst, Hawkenbury, Capel, Tunbridge Wells, Southborough and many other communities in my constituency. My constituency neighbour, my hon. Friend the Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), wanted me to make mention of the fact that many of his communities are also affected by pretty much identical problems. My constituents are not surprised that the company was this year fined the record sum of £126 million compared with its size than most other towns in the south-east of England. It is perfectly reasonable to demand that, in doing so, residents should not be taken for granted or taken for a ride.

I would therefore like to ask the Minister three things. First, will she intervene to insist that Southern Water and others in my constituency where development is being considered, whether it is in the town or the countryside, commercial or residential, the rules should be established and acted upon, and that there is always “I before E: infrastructure before expansion?”

If we do these things, we can look forward to a future in which new development is seen not as something that is bound to make existing residents’ lives worse, but as something that offers the prospect of improvements to the quality of life for everyone in the locality. My constituents want that assurance. They want action, and they want to see it now.

12.18 am

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): It is late, but I think we are all still very focused on this issue, which is a tricky one. To be talking about sewage at this time of night is really focusing the mind. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Tunbridge Wells (Greg Clark) on securing this debate concerning Southern Water and the issues he is facing in his constituency. He is a strong spokesman for his local area, and rightly so. I just want to touch on this whole issue because we are talking about water and a water company, and water is so important in our lives. It plays an important role in our 25-year environment plan and there is a whole section on water in the Environment Bill, which had its successful Second Reading in this Chamber earlier tonight. Some of the things in the Bill will touch on issues raised by my right hon. Friend.

The Government recognise the need to secure long-term water supplies due to climate change and our growing population, so we expect the water industry to take more action in several areas, such as reducing demand for water alongside investing to increase water supplies. The industry also needs to take action on sewerage infrastructure. We recently consulted on a range of measures to reduce personal water usage, including a cull for evidence. The need for investment in infrastructure is well set out in the draft national policy statement for water resources infrastructure. I am concerned, however, about the quality of the water environment, and there is more to be done. In the case of some water companies, a great deal more needs to be done.

Last week, the Environment Agency launched a consultation on how we protect and improve the water environment. The “Challenges and Choices” consultation explores how we can work together to manage our waters and deliver significant improvements to water bodies in England in the face of increasing pressures, one of which is housing and the growing population. Given such challenges, the Government want a water sector that delivers more for the customer and the environment. The Government and regulators are challenging the sector to improve its environmental performance, put customers at the heart of the business, and restore trust in the sector. I believe that my right hon. Friend actually used the word “trust” in his powerful speech.

Companies are responding to the challenge and have put forward proposals in their business plans committing to improve performance and offer bill reductions to customers, but there is much more to be done. For example, too much water simply leaks from the system,
and significant investment is needed to improve the resilience of our water supplies and to improve service and environmental standards. In July, as my right hon. Friend might remember, the previous Environment Secretary called a meeting with all the water company chief executives to hold them to account over their performance towards customers and the environment. It was quite a groundbreaking moment that received a lot of coverage because he was quite ferocious with the companies.

Several companies, including Southern Water, had recently been assessed by the Environment Agency as demonstrating unacceptable levels of environmental performance. Companies were also challenged over customer service and leakage performance. As a relatively new Environment Minister, I am now working with regulators to put pressure on water companies to do more to increase resilience, enhance the environment and provide customers with value for money.

Water, as we all know, is a really precious commodity, and it needs to be treated as such. I want to be clear that Government and regulators are committed to taking action and holding water companies to account for their poor performance. Earlier this month, Ofwat issued a penalty against Southern Water of £126 million due to serious failures in the operation of sewage treatment works and for deliberately misreporting performance information. This was the largest enforcement action ever taken by Ofwat and resulted in a £3 million financial penalty and £123 million in rebates to be paid out to customers over the next five years.

I am pleased that Southern Water has made commitments to be more open and transparent about its performance with respect to the environment, and there have been changes in management personnel at the company. Additionally, Southern Water has now committed to reduce pollution incidents by 41% by 2025, along with reducing supply interruptions by 51%. The Environment Agency has set out ambitious measures in the water industry national environment programme, which will result in £4.4 billion of investment by water companies in the natural environment between 2020 and 2025, and £547 million of that investment relates to Southern Water. The Environment Agency has set out ambitious measures in the water industry national environment programme, which will result in £4.4 billion of investment by water companies in the natural environment between 2020 and 2025, and £547 million of that investment relates to Southern Water. I am optimistic that that will help to tackle some of the biggest challenges facing the water environment, from the spread of invasive species to flow affected by chemicals and nutrient pollution. It is imperative that we clean up our water and, as Environment Minister, I want to see improvements.

To help to prevent sewage flooding incidents such as those that my right hon. Friend mentioned in his constituency, water and sewerage companies have a number of duties in relation to drainage, wastewater and sewerage, including a duty to effectively drain within their areas of operation. Drainage and wastewater infrastructure must be better prepared for extreme rainfall events to reduce the risk of overloaded sewers flooding homes or overflowing into rivers and the sea, which is simply unacceptable—my right hon. Friend referred to some incidents where that happened. I am committed to ensuring that water companies are making those preparations. That is why the Environment Bill contains a measure to place drainage and wastewater management on a statutory footing, because whereas the water that comes out of our taps has previously been dealt with on a statutory footing, interestingly, sewage has not and has instead been dealt with through a voluntary arrangement. I am optimistic that that will be a strong feature of the Environment Bill, which we have talked about tonight.

That measure will ensure that sewerage companies fully assess their wastewater network capacity and develop collaborative solutions with local authorities and other bodies responsible for parts of the drainage system. That will be in addition to the statutory plans that companies already publish on managing long-term water supplies. South East Water, the water supplier for Tunbridge Wells, recently agreed and published its plan. I expect Southern Water to work collaboratively with South East Water to ensure that their plans align. Again, the Environment Bill contains measures on getting water companies to work together much more collaboratively, so that their plans overlap, whether they share the same boundaries or whether, as in this instance, one has the water coming out of the tap and the other deals with what goes down the loo. There will be a duty to work together much more closely on those issues.

The Government have also published a surface water management action plan, which sets out the steps we are taking with the Environment Agency and others to manage the risk of surface water flooding. The plan sets out 22 actions to improve our understanding of the risks of flooding and strengthen delivery. Key actions include making sure that infrastructure is resilient—something that I think my right hon. Friend was getting at—joining up planning for surface water management and building local authority capacity. One of the actions in the plan is to make drainage and wastewater management plans, and that is now in the Environment Bill. Ofwat has recommended that water companies should already have started their action plans, so Southern Water should be starting to formulate its plan. In addition, the autumn Budget allocated £13 million to tackle risks from floods and climate change at the national level. Local authorities have the opportunity to bid for some of that funding to address local needs.

My right hon. Friend also talked about new housing developments and the pressure that they can put on drainage systems. I fully understand—because he painted such a clear, if ghastly picture—what he said about the situation in Paddock Wood and the new housing there and in surrounding areas. I have a great deal of sympathy with those who have had to experience these sewage events. As a slight aside, Southern Water does not have a good record of responding to complaints either—indeed, it has a very poor record—and I imagine that a lot of those affected will have made complaints.

The national planning policy framework was revised in July 2018 and stated that sustainable drainage systems—SuDS, which I am a fan of—should be given priority in new developments in flood risk areas. The NPPF strengthened existing policy to make clear the expectation that SuDS are to be provided in all new major developments, unless demonstrated to be inappropriate. Local flood authorities must also be consulted on surface water drainage considerations in planning applications for all major new developments. This really ought to go some way to address issues raised by my right hon. Friend. Water companies should be consulted on these planning applications, and the plans should be rejected where it is thought that the infrastructure really is not suitable. Water companies will charge new developments for
connection to the sewerage systems, so they have that right to charge where they think we need more connections, and they should use this money to pay for any upgrades.

The economic regulator Ofwat is currently in the final stages of its price review process with the water companies. Ofwat has pushed Southern Water to improve its performance, make efficiency savings and reduce bills. I support Ofwat in its work with Southern Water to help it to bring its business plan up to standard. Without a doubt, evidence highlights that the performance of Southern Water has left a great deal to be desired. If improvements are not forthcoming, I shall be requesting a meeting with Southern Water. I believe my right hon. Friend asked whether I would step in and take some serious action, and I shall be doing that and asking some serious questions.

Greg Clark: I am grateful for the commitment that my hon. Friend has given to take action. Will she agree to meet me, and perhaps some of the residents in my constituency, to discuss the response to her meeting with Southern Water, so that we can make an assessment of whether things are heading in the right direction?

Rebecca Pow: Of course I will meet my right hon. Friend. We want water companies that are working effectively and efficiently, and we need to understand the pressures they are under and how to deliver for all new houses. We are committed to building new houses as a Government. We need new houses, but they need to function properly, with the right infrastructure, so of course I will meet him.

In conclusion, we want to see a water industry that puts customers at the heart of the business, contributes to communities, and protects and enhances our precious natural environment. I will continue to push the sector and hold water companies, such as Southern Water in this case, to account if necessary.

Question put and agreed to.

12.33 am

House adjourned.
Oral Answers to Questions

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Hearing Aids

1. David T. C. Davies (Monmouth) (Con): What steps he is taking to increase access to hearing aids. [900193]

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): In 2018, the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence issued new guidance called “Hearing loss in adults: assessment and management”, which aims to improve hearing loss services, including the provision of hearing aids. The guidance brings together evidence, standards, guidance and case studies to encourage best practice across England.

David T. C. Davies: Does my hon. Friend agree that we in England have been cutting waiting times for hearing aids by using private companies such as Specsavers, and that that demonstrates a huge difference between privatising the NHS, which this Conservative party would never, ever support, and using private companies to provide a first-rate health service free at the point of use?

Caroline Dinenage: My hon. Friend hits the nail on the head. We are absolutely committed to the principle of an NHS that is free at the point of use, but the NHS has, under successive Governments, commissioned care from the private sector to ensure that patients receive the treatment that they need as quickly, safely and near to home as possible. All NHS healthcare, irrespective of how it is provided, must be of the highest possible quality and improve outcomes.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): When the Government published their action plan on hearing loss in 2015, it was widely welcomed across the deaf community, as well as in the House, but there is now just a sense in the deaf community that NHS England’s commitment to the action plan is somehow waning. Will the Minister confirm that the Government are still fully committed to the action plan and will also encourage NHS England to carry on?

Caroline Dinenage: Yes absolutely; I can give the hon. Gentleman that clear reassurance, and I thank him for his work as chair of the all-party group on deafness.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): The Minister will recall that in the loneliness strategy we showcased Action on Hearing Loss’s “Hear to Meet” befriending service, which connects those with hearing impairments to share experiences. Alongside the work that the Department is doing to provide good-quality hearing aids, what more is it doing to recognise that those with hearing loss, especially children, can be among the most lonely in society?

Caroline Dinenage: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. She is absolutely right to highlight the fact that any form of disability can cause social isolation and loneliness, but hearing loss and deafness can do so almost more than anything else. I pay massive tribute to the incredible work that she did as Minister for sport and civil society to further this. I am a keen member of the inter-ministerial group on hearing loss, which does so much to further that aim and aspiration.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): North Staffordshire clinical commissioning group is the only CCG in the country to restrict hearing aids. It is about to launch its consultation to ensure that all my constituents can get hearing aids when they need them. Does the Minister agree that it should be compliant with NICE guidelines?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to raise that. CCGs are responsible for the commissioning of NHS audiology services, including the provision of hearing aids. We expect all CCGs to have regard to NICE clinical guidance when commissioning services for their local population.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): With the Sheffield Children’s Hospital last night, I was reminded again that in childhood, dreams are made and die are cast, and through our senses, we come to terms with the world around us. As Dickens said, the best of all stories is a child’s story. Sometimes those stories are not happy ones initially, and deaf children in particular struggle and suffer as they come to terms with the world about them. Will the Minister ensure that every deaf child in Lincolnshire has not only an education, health and care plan, but all the innovations and technology that allow them to live their life to the full and cast a future as glorious as any of ours?

Caroline Dinenage: I certainly could not have put that more articulately than my right hon. Friend did, and he is absolutely right. In 2018, the Government provided contracts worth more than £25 million to help children with special educational needs and disability to access the right support. The Department for Education is reviewing the SEND commitment within that Department, but we are supporting it to do that in the Department of Health and Social Care to ensure that children get the care and support and educational support plans that they need.

Mr Speaker: We all noted the reference to Dickens; I am glad that the right hon. Gentleman’s record of literary and philosophical allusions continues apace.
Edward Argar: The Government’s commitment is clear. While no Government can bind a future Government, our commitment is very clear, so my advice to the right hon. Gentleman’s constituents is to vote Conservative.

Paul Scully (Sutton and Cheam) (Con): I would like to correct the record, in that my predecessor, Paul Burstow, mentioned before the 2015 election that he regretted the withdrawal of that money.

Does the Minister agree that, in giving us the money that we need for the Epsom and St Helier Trust, it is right to reward a plan that finally will save St Helier without using it as a political football and will improve health outcomes in a brand-new building that we can be proud to have in Sutton?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is a doughty champion for his constituents and his trust, and he is absolutely right.

Mr Speaker: Not just a champion but doughty!

Siobhain McDonagh (Mitcham and Morden) (Lab): This plan could see two A&Es reduced to one and two maternity units reduced to one. Have the Government taken into account the need for extra capital funding for both St George’s and Croydon university trust should St Helier place this new hospital on the Sutton Hospital site?

Edward Argar: The hon. Lady will know that the plans that will be brought forward will be clinically led and delivered and constructed by the trust itself, so I would encourage her to engage with the trust and with neighbouring trusts, but surely she would welcome this significant investment by the Government in her health infrastructure.

Cystic Fibrosis Drugs

3. Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): What steps he is taking to help ensure access to Orkambi on the NHS.

4. Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): What progress has been made in enabling the provision of Orkambi on the NHS.

18. Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): What progress he has made on increasing access to drugs to treat cystic fibrosis.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): I am delighted that a deal has been agreed to provide Orkambi and other cystic fibrosis drugs on the NHS. This deal is great value for the NHS and backed by the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence, but crucially it will improve thousands of lives. My heartfelt thanks go out to many campaigners from right across the House who have pushed this agenda but especially to the Cystic Fibrosis Trust and the patients who, along with their families, have bravely campaigned against this devastating disease. I am thrilled that we can make this progress.

Christian Matheson: It may have taken a few years, but I warmly welcome the Secretary of State’s announcement and congratulate him on it. I echo his congratulations...
to all the campaigners, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin), who has led much of the campaign.

Ten per cent. of cystic fibrosis sufferers are still waiting for approval for another critical combination therapy, called Exacalad™. Can the Secretary of State reassure me that eligible patients will not have to wait so long for that to be approved?

**Matt Hancock:** Of course I would have liked the deal to happen sooner, but I am glad that the company has now committed itself to engaging properly in the normal processes which mean that we obtain drugs nearly as fast as any country in the world. This result—this deal—shows that the system is working to get cutting-edge drugs into the NHS at good value for the NHS pound.

I join the hon. Gentleman in paying tribute to the hon. Member for Dudley North (Ian Austin). I also pay tribute to the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), and to other Members in all parts of the House who have campaigned on this issue. It is great to have made some progress.

**Kerry McCarthy:** I am obviously delighted by this news, and the Secretary of State will know how delighted my family were, because when the news broke I showed him the family WhatsApp with lots of exclamation marks and happy smiley-face emojis. As I have told the House who have campaigned on this issue. It is great to have made some progress.

**Matt Hancock:** Absolutely. I pay tribute to the hon. Lady, who raised that case with me last night and gave me advance warning that she would raise it in the House today. I shall be happy to ensure that the relevant member of the team meets her with her constituent, if appropriate, so that we can get to the bottom of this.

**Marion Fellows** (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I want to associate myself with the thanks to all the campaigners who worked so hard to ensure that these drugs would be available in England as well as Scotland. I never doubted that my Government would press and press, and I am delighted that the Secretary of State's Government have followed suit. However, there are still great Brexit uncertainties. Given that people fought for so long, what reassurances can the Secretary of State give those who will obtain these life-saving drugs that they will be possible, affordable and sustainable?

**Matt Hancock:** The agreement that the hon. Lady's Government—the UK Government—reached with Vertex means that this drug will be available in Wales and Northern Ireland as well. It is true that Scotland chose to go it alone and as a result has not received such good value for money, but what really matters is that the drug is now available throughout the United Kingdom.

**Bim Afolami** (Hitchin and Harpenden) (Con): Will the Secretary of State pay tribute to campaigners in my constituency such as Matthew Dixon-Dyer, who campaign very strongly and lobbied me very effectively? Will he also illuminate the House on how, in future, we can have smoother access to drugs such as Orkambi on the NHS?

**Matt Hancock:** My hon. Friend has campaigned long and hard and has talked to me an awful lot about how important it has been to obtain Orkambi and the other cystic fibrosis drugs that will save lives, and I pay tribute to his campaigning. As I have said, we now have a system that allows access to drugs for the NHS at some of the best value in the world, and that system is working. It is clearly getting the drugs that are needed into the NHS, and I think that we should all get behind it.

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con): Children and their families throughout the UK will be saying a huge thank you for Orkambi. Will my right hon. Friend now turn his attention to phenylketonuria, or PKU, and the drug Kuvan, so that children like my constituent Cait, who is now 11, do not need to wait any longer?

**Matt Hancock:** I can assure my hon. Friend, who has campaigned long and hard on the issue of access to Kuvan, that we are working on that as well. I hope very much that we can come to a positive conclusion.

**Daniel Zeichner** (Cambridge) (Lab): The system did finally work, but did it not take far too long, and is it not time to introduce transparency into this opaque system, particularly when the Americans are waiting to pounce on our pharmaceutical industry?

**Matt Hancock:** The NHS is off the table in trade talks and pharmaceutical pricing is off the table. Transparency over pharmaceutical pricing would not benefit this country at all because we get the best deals in the world because we can keep them confidential, so it is a slight surprise to hear a Labour Member argue for what would effectively lead to higher prices for drugs in the NHS. Instead, we will protect the NHS.

### Genomics

5. **Bill Grant** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): What recent assessment he has made of the merits of using genomics in healthcare.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care** (Jo Churchill): We are world leading in genomics and should celebrate that. A recent trial at Addenbrooke's Hospital in Cambridge provided whole genome sequencing, identifying underlying genetic conditions for babies and children in intensive care. As a result, three quarters of those young patients received changes to their care. The NHS genomic service is working to embed genomics in routine healthcare. Later this year, the national genomic healthcare strategy will set out the ambitious programme for the next 10 years.

**Bill Grant:** With increasing direct-to-consumer genomics testing by private companies, can my hon. Friend advise what assessment has been made of the potential impact of self-referrals on NHS services?

**Jo Churchill:** Patients who need a genomic test from the national genomic test directory will be referred to the NHS genomic medicine service. However, I recognise
testing and genomic testing in NHS England? seems to have gone quiet, so can the Minister confirm

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): Health service professionals in the Black Country are concerned that the removal of local funding for in-house molecular testing for cancer in April in favour of regional genomic laboratory hubs could in certain circumstances cause delays in diagnosis and be more expensive. Will the Minister look at this again in order to refine the processes to address these particular issues?

Jo Churchill: Clinicians should be in charge of the process, and I have been assured that the change, using genomic testing, is better for patients and better for outcomes, but I would of course be happy to meet the hon. Gentleman and discuss it further.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): I commend the Minister for the progressive approach the Government have taken to genomics, but for a large number of genetic diseases the symptoms do not manifest themselves until after developmental damage has been done. Will the Government consider whether we should extend genomic testing to all neonates—all newborns—at some point in the future?

Jo Churchill: The Government are very open to such an approach. Genomics is transformative, and the early detection of disease means that we can treat patients from birth better and more efficiently.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Surely all this must be put in the context of the Topol review, with so much innovation and not just in genomics? There is so much innovation going on in the health service, but we have to make sure that there are well-managed and efficient hospital trusts running these programmes. Many are not like Huddersfield and are not up to speed, and we have to get hospitals up to speed in using the new technologies.

Jo Churchill: I totally agree with the hon. Gentleman, and my constituency neighbour, the Secretary of State, is totally on this programme.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): In January, the Secretary of State announced that genomic testing would be provided in NHS England to healthy subjects for a few hundred pounds. This ill-advised plan, which would have widened health inequalities, seems to have gone quiet, so can the Minister confirm that the Government no longer plan to sell genetic testing and genomic testing in NHS England?

Jo Churchill: As the hon. Lady knows, because we have worked together on this agenda, it is never about selling the product; it is about better patient care and ensuring that we get technology to the patient as speedily as we can for better and appropriate diagnosis.

Bedrolite

6. Margot James (Stourbridge) (Ind): What recent assessment he has made of the effectiveness of Bedrolite in treating (a) multiple sclerosis and (b) other neurological conditions.

The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock): We have changed the law so that specialist doctors on the GMC’s specialist register can now prescribe cannabis-based products. I have asked the NHS to undertake a rapid review of how this is working, and my Department is now working with delivery partners to implement the report’s recommendations.

Margot James: I thank my right hon. Friend for his answer, and for his work in this area, but leaving the decision to prescribe cannabis for medical use to individual doctors while NICE is saying that more evidence is needed risks the inertia that has led the MS Society to conclude that not a single person has yet benefited from the legalisation of cannabis for medical use, except those who are able to pay up to £1,000 a month. Will my right hon. Friend meet the MS Society and me to discuss more ways of accelerating the uptake of Bedrolite among patients who have a reasonable expectation of benefiting from it?

Matt Hancock: I am very happy to meet my hon. Friend and colleagues from the MS Society. She is right to say that we need to ensure we get the evidence that the clinicians understandably want, and in fact we have committed public funds, through the National Institute for Health Research, to establish clinical trials to develop that evidence base.

End-of-life Care

7. Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): What steps he is taking to support end-of-life care.

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): We are absolutely committed to supporting end-of-life care, not only through £4.5 billion-worth of investment in primary and community services but through providing an additional £25 million to palliative care and hospices in 2019-20. Today, I am in a position to announce how the geographical spending of that money will be allocated, and I will be putting the regional breakdown in the Libraries of both Houses this afternoon.

Fiona Bruce: What are the Government doing to better resource support for children’s palliative care, including addressing the shortage of specialist doctors and hospice nurses needed to care for children with life-limiting conditions?

Caroline Dinenage: We care passionately about the way in which children’s palliative care is delivered. That is why we have increased the children’s hospice grant from £12 million this year to £25 million in 2023-24. We have also seen a nearly 50% increase in doctors working in palliative care medicine since 2010, but the interim NHS people plan will set out actions to meet the challenges of workforce supply and demand.
Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): Last week in the Queen’s Speech debate, I mentioned a constituent of mine, Liz, who had declined the offer of palliative radiotherapy treatment simply because it would involve a four-hour round trip to get from the Lakes to Preston. Does the Minister agree that it is wrong for cancer patients to be forced to choose shorter lives because they cannot cope physically with the longer journeys?

Caroline Dinenage: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise this matter, and I know that he is meeting the Minister for Health, my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Charnwood (Edward Argar), shortly to discuss the details of that individual case. More broadly, the long-term planned commitment to spend that additional £4.5 billion-worth of investment in primary and community health services will definitely help those services to be delivered much closer to people’s homes.

Huw Merriman (Bexhill and Battle) (Con): Hospice in the Weald is building the UK’s first cottage hospice, and I viewed it on Friday. It allows family members to care for and stay with their loved ones until the end of their life, and it is absolutely fantastic. The cottage hospice is looking for a Minister to come and open it. I know that there is an election coming, but will a Minister from the winning Front Bench come and do that honour for us in East Sussex?

Caroline Dinenage: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for mentioning that brilliant initiative. I think we will probably be falling over ourselves to volunteer to do the honours, but I would be very happy to put myself forward for that.

Mr Speaker: Not least due to the charm and courtesy of the hon. Member for Bexhill and Battle (Huw Merriman), quite apart from the magnificent facility that he has just been busily championing.

Sir Vince Cable (Twickenham) (LD): The Minister will know that her colleague, the Justice Secretary, has declined to proceed with a call for evidence on the sensitive issue of assisted dying. Would it not be appropriate for her Department to gather evidence from the professional bodies involved in end-of-life care, to ensure that legislation is evidence-led?

Caroline Dinenage: You will know as well as everyone in the House, Mr Speaker, that that is a sensitive matter on which Members have contrasting views. The right hon. Gentleman is right to continue to raise the issue, but the legislation surrounding it continues to lie with the Ministry of Justice.

Mental Health Services

8. James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure the adequate long-term provision of mental health services. [900200]

20. Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): What steps he is taking to ensure the adequate long-term provision of mental health services. [900213]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ms Nadine Dorries): By 2023, an additional £2.3 billion a year will flow into mental health services across England. Our long-term plan for that increased investment will ensure that more adults, children and young people than ever before are able to get mental health support when they need it. Increased funding will also support further improvements in quality of care and patient experience.

James Cartlidge: I welcome my hon. Friend to her position. My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State will be more than familiar with the long-running problems at the Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust, which is our county’s main mental health trust. There is a huge effort to try to improve it, but I know from constituency cases that significant problems still exist. Will Ministers update us on what progress they think has been made at NSFT?

Ms Dorries: My hon. Friend works tirelessly on his constituents’ behalf. In fact, I think I am meeting some of his constituents tomorrow. I will look into the issues he raises, but the trust has been working since May 2018 on delivering the immediate improvements suggested by the Care Quality Commission, and leadership support has been provided by East London NHS Foundation Trust. I promise to look into the situation to see where the trust is at this point and what improvements have been made, and I may have that information to feed back to him tomorrow.

Jack Lopresti: I welcome the Minister’s recent announcement of greater support for people affected by the suicide of a loved one, but what form will that additional support actually take?

Ms Dorries: It goes without saying that anyone affected by a friend or family member taking their own life will be absolutely devastated. We made an announcement at the weekend of nearly £1 million of funding to target 10 areas to help to provide assistance and support to the bereaved. We will assess those 10 sites to see what is delivered and how it works, and we will hopefully be able to roll the scheme out across the UK in the future.

Dr Paul Williams (Stockton South) (Lab): I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. The time in a woman’s life when she is most likely to struggle with her mental health is when she is pregnant or shortly after delivery, but half of all women with depression during that period say that their problem remains unidentified by the NHS. Does the Minister think that it is time for all women to get a postnatal check from their GP as part of the GP contract?

Ms Dorries: We are looking into that. Perinatal support is provided to women across the UK. We have been pushing this from the Department. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that this is a time in a woman’s life when she may suffer from poor mental health or a mental health condition that is directly related to her pregnancy, and that is when women need support most. We are looking into this, we are pushing this and we are looking into providing that, hopefully as part of the GP contract.
Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (LD): People outside the House will have listened to the Minister’s warm words, yet we know that still far too many people right across our country are having to travel hundreds of miles to access services. Young people having to travel 300 miles to get a bed is unacceptable. Will the Minister tell us whether the investment she outlined will be ring fenced, because it has not been thus far? Will she also be investing specifically in young people’s mental health services?

Ms Dorries: That is a big question because it covers two areas. This Government have invested £2.3 billion in mental health services, a huge amount of which is to go into salaries, to deliver community health services where they are needed: close to patients and to their relatives and families. It is also to provide community health teams and support teams in schools for young people. Clinical commissioning groups are under an obligation to provide those mental health services with the set funding. If the hon. Lady would like to meet to hear more about that, I will be happy to discuss it with her.

Mr Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): As this is your last Health questions, Mr Speaker, may I thank you for your many years of campaigning for speech and language therapy for children? It has given great hope to many families in a situation similar to your own.

On the issue of early intervention, given that half of all mental health conditions are established before the age of 14, does the Minister, who is passionate about this, agree that mental health provision in schools is essential? Will she update the House on progress towards the 2023 objective of a quarter of schools having a mental health lead?

Ms Dorries: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question and for his work as Secretary of State. He was the longest-serving Secretary of State for Health ever, and he is passionately interested in this subject, too. Yes, we are on track—in fact, we are more than on track—to meet our objective of 25% of schools being covered by a school mental health support team by 2023-24.

The school mental health support teams have been launched in trailblazer areas, and I visited one a few weeks ago at Springwest Academy in Hounslow to see the amazing work the teams are doing with young children. The teams are teaching coping strategies and identifying mental health problems as they arise very early in life, which helps children to deal with those mental health problems now and into adulthood. We are on track and we hope to meet that objective.

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Last week it was reported that a 16-year-old boy in Milton Keynes tragically died by suicide. His referral to mental health services was rejected because he did not meet the threshold as his mental health problems were not deemed severe enough. This is deeply shocking, and it is clear that too many children are going without the support they need. Will the Minister now match Labour’s commitment to invest in children’s mental health services and to ensure that every secondary school has access to a trained mental health professional?

Ms Dorries: Obviously I cannot comment on an individual case, but what I can say is that the NICE guidelines on assessment for suicide were recently sent out to A&E departments to ensure that people who present with mental health problems are treated holistically and looked at in the round to assess whether they are a suicide risk.

We are investing £2.3 billion in mental health services—more than invested by any previous Government—and a huge amount of that is going towards children and young people. I hope cases such as the one highlighted by the hon. Lady will be a thing of the past. We have turned a corner. We are rolling out these mental health teams and, in the last year alone, 3,000 more people are working with young people and young adults. We have the new training scheme and the school mental health support teams. There is more to be done, but I hope such stories will become a thing of the past.

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Prescription Costs: Health Outcomes

9. Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect of prescription costs on the health outcomes of people with chronic illnesses.

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): Extensive arrangements are in place to help people to afford national health service prescriptions. Those include a broad range of prescription charge exemptions, for which someone with a chronic illness may qualify.

Helen Goodman: I think the Minister is being too complacent. The chronic illnesses list has not been updated for years, and I have had complaints from Mr E with coeliac disease, Mrs L with multiple sclerosis and Mr A with cystic fibrosis—he is taking up to 50 tablets a day. With each item costing £9, can the Minister not see how much hardship this is putting on people?

Caroline Dinenage: There have been NHS prescription charges in England for decades, and successive Governments have concluded that patients who can afford it should pay prescription charges in order to contribute to the running of the NHS, but a huge number of exemptions are in place and mean that, in England, 89% of NHS prescription items dispensed in the community are currently provided free of charge. People on low incomes who do not qualify for an exemption will be eligible through the NHS low-income scheme.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Ind): Prescriptions not only include pharmaceuticals, so I congratulate the Secretary of State on the launch of a national academy for social prescribing, which he pushed through with his own energy and enthusiasm. Prescribing alternative treatments such as art therapy and speech and language therapy can have a massive impact on people’s mental health and on many other ailments. This Department has undertaken a revolutionary step, and I wholeheartedly congratulate him and all his Ministers.

Caroline Dinenage: The right hon. Gentleman plays down his role in this agenda; he has been a great champion for social prescribing. All of us in the Department’s Front-Bench team have met people for whom social prescribing has been life changing; it has totally changed the way they are able to deal with their symptoms and illnesses. It really is a massive game changer.
Mr Speaker: But of course modesty is the right hon. Gentleman’s middle name.

Mr Vaizey: And humility.

Mr Speaker: Indeed.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): With one in three arthritis sufferers missing out on at least one prescription due to cost, what can the Minister say to the pensioner in Barnsley who has had her pension cut, lost their local bus service and now lost out on the treatment that enables them to simply walk down the street? Is it not time the Government matched Labour’s promise, and invested in pensions, services and free prescriptions on the NHS?

Caroline Dinenage: I simply say to the hon. Lady. Lady that people over the age of 60 qualify for free prescriptions.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): Too many patients cut back on their prescribed medicines or go without them altogether because they simply cannot afford to pay prescription charges. Research by University College London indicates that this non-adherence to prescribing regimes costs the NHS £500 million more in complex treatments and hospitalisation. Prescription charges are a tax on sickness that disproportionately burdens those who have chronic illnesses and those on low incomes. Does the Minister agree that it is high time we brought an end to these charges, which fly in the face of the principle of an NHS free at the point of delivery?

Caroline Dinenage: I suppose I should probably have declared an interest in this issue, because I am severely asthmatic and I do not get free prescriptions, but then again I do not think I should. There is a prescription exemption system designed specifically to assist people who are most likely to need support in paying for prescriptions: people on low incomes or in full-time education; the over-60s; people living with many long-term conditions; and people with an increased risk of illness, such as pregnant women. That is why 89% of prescriptions are dispensed without charge.

Cancer Diagnosis and Treatment

10. Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What steps he is taking to improve cancer (a) diagnosis and (b) treatment.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): Cancer survival rates are, thankfully, at a record high. Last year, the NHS carried out 53 million diagnostic tests, which is 53% higher than the number carried out in 2010, but we need to do more. Our aim is to diagnose three quarters of all cancers early, so that 55,000 more people each year survive cancer for another five years. To achieve that, we are radically overhauling screening programmes to improve access and uptake, investing £200 million in diagnostic equipment and accelerating the adoption of the most innovative cancer treatments.

Mike Wood: Bowel cancer claims 16,000 lives a year, which is 45 every day, yet just 55% of people in Dudley take up bowel cancer screening. What are the Government doing to ensure that more people take up this life-saving cancer screening?

Jo Churchill: I thank my hon. Friend for all the work he does to make sure people are aware of cancer screening and take up the offer. Bowel cancer early is vital if we are to beat this disease. We have committed to lowering the age of bowel cancer screening from 60 to 50 and we rolled out the fit bowel screening test in June. It is easier to use and is expected to improve uptake by 70% in towns like Dudley. Sir Mike Richards’ screening review sets out important recommendations, using prioritisation of evidence-based incentives. We will set out our plan for implementing it next year, so that people can access screening more accessibly—in car parks or wherever else it suits their lifestyle—and we can save more lives.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): Access to screening is a function of people’s poverty. For example, in Newcastle, cervical screening rates vary from 85% to 23%. A Macmillan Cancer Support report said clearly that we need to have access to screening in the places where people are, particularly for those who are running two jobs and so on. What is the Minister specifically doing to make screening available where people are?

Jo Churchill: I agree with the hon. Lady on this. The Richards review and working through the recommendations will enable us to put more screening in places where people can access it. The Eve Appeal, specifically directed at cervical cancer, is looking to put screening in workplaces and so on, but anybody who is worried must get tested.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): The Secretary of State is absolutely right in his intent to put the one-year cancer survival metric at the very heart of the cancer strategy, to encourage earlier diagnosis, which the all-party parliamentary group on cancer has long campaigned for. Will the Government ensure that adequate funding is attached to the metric, so that we can finally start closing the gap on international survival rates?

Jo Churchill: I thank my hon. Friend for all his work leading the all-party parliamentary group on cancer. We are putting more money into diagnostic tests, which means that there will be more than 7.9 million more tests. Making sure that we have the correct data on survivability, in which the one-year test is an important metric, is part of that programme.

Jonathan Ashworth (Leicester South) (Lab/Co-op): In the past year, more than 34,000 cancer patients have waited beyond two months for treatment. Every single waiting time measure for cancer has worsened in the past year. Surely, the Minister should be ashamed that so many more cancer patients are waiting longer for treatment.

Jo Churchill: I probably know as well as most that waiting for a cancer diagnosis is traumatic and that it needs to be done as speedily as possible. There is nothing more frightening than that wait, so what have we done? In 2018, 2.2 million people were seen by a specialist for suspected cancer—that is more than 1.2 million more people per annum since 2010. Getting to the specialist an individual needs as quickly as possible is what this Government are focused on, and that is why we have
put so much emphasis on having specialist clinical nurses in the cancer workforce. We will carry on making cancer a priority.

**Jonathan Ashworth:** But the problem is that that is not happening, is it? Cancer patients are waiting longer for treatment. In recent weeks, we have had an avalanche of hospital board papers blaming understaffing and George Osborne's pension tax changes for the deterioration in waiting time standards. The Prime Minister promised to fix Osborne's pension tax mess. How many more patients need to be added to the waiting list before it is fixed?

**Jo Churchill:** The guidance for doctors’ pensions was changed last month. As I said, making sure that everybody can access a GP as soon as they are worried and then get to a specialist as soon as possible is our top priority, and making sure we have a broad-based cancer workforce is part of that plan. Delivering these things, as well as rapid diagnostic centres with £200 million in new machinery, is how we are going to do it.

**PrEP**

11. **Neil Coyle** (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): What steps he is taking to establish a national programme for PrEP by April 2020. [900203]

**The Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Matt Hancock):** We have expanded access to PrEP—pre-exposure prophylaxis—so that everyone who needs it should have access. Thousands more places remain available on the trial. We are working closely with the NHS, Public Health England and local authorities, who have to play their part, to plan for a seamless transition from the trial to routine commissioning from April next year.

**Neil Coyle:** The Secretary of State gave a personal commitment that the PrEP trial would be extended. He has failed to meet that commitment, and men have contracted HIV as a direct result of the Government’s failure. What faith can people who need PrEP and organisations such as the Terrence Higgins Trust, the NHS and councils have that the Government’s national programme will be ready and able to meet the demand that exists?

**Matt Hancock:** This is an important issue and I care very much about getting the roll-out right. I chastise the hon. Gentleman slightly for his tone. The Minister met the Terrence Higgins Trust yesterday. It agrees with us to get local authorities to do their part, because they have to play their part, to plan for a seamless transition from the trial to routine commissioning from April next year.

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**Mr Speaker:** I call Tommy Sheppard. Where is young Sheppard? [Interruption.] He has withdrawn. I was not advised of that. Never mind, he is a most active beaver in the Chamber in normal circumstances. It does not matter that he is not here, because Mr Andrew Rosindell is.

**Sir David Amess** (Southend West) (Con): Speak for Romford!

**Mr Speaker:** Yes, speak for Romford. Well done.

**Seven-day-a-week NHS Services**

13. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): What progress his Department has made on providing NHS services seven days a week.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ms Nadine Dorries):** Everyone now has easier and more convenient access to GP services,
including appointments in the evenings and at weekends. There are also substantial improvement programmes in place related to seven-day hospital services set out in the NHS long-term plan, including hospitals with major A&E departments providing same-day emergency care services 12 hours a day, seven days a week, by the end of 2019-20.

Andrew Rosindell: I thank the Minister for her reply, but I am increasingly concerned that my constituents in Romford often have to wait three weeks or even longer for routine appointments with their GPs. What action are the Government taking to ensure that such long waiting times are reduced and preferably eliminated altogether?

Ms Dorries: I thank my hon. Friend for that question. Just over 40% of all booked appointments take place on the same day with GPs. However, it is important to recognise that many patients will be appropriately booking ahead as part of the ongoing plan for long-term conditions. The new GP contract will see billions of pounds in extra investment for improved access to GPs, expanded services at local practices, and longer appointments for patients who need them. NHS England is working with stakeholders and is undertaking a national review of access to general practice services.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): With more than 5 million people across England unable to book an appointment with a GP outside working hours, many of our constituents have had to wait two or three weeks to get an appointment. With the loss of 1,600 full-time GPs since 2015 and billions of pounds in cuts since 2010, does the Minister realise that the NHS is certainly not safe with the Conservative party, and that is what the British people think?

Ms Dorries: I simply do not recognise the scenario that the hon. Lady has just articulated. There is access to GP practices throughout England outside of working hours.

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content of drinks subject to the levy decreased by 28.8% between 2015 and 2018, so we have been able to make significant investments in activity and healthy eating in schools.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): Mr Speaker, as this is the last time that we will have Health questions with you in the Chair, I want to thank you for being a fantastic Speaker—particularly through your support for Back Benchers and ensuring that we can be heard through urgent questions.

Last week, we found that the number of people receiving publicly-funded social care has fallen by 15,000 in the past year. We know that 95 people a day die while waiting for care and that cuts of £7.7 billion have been made from social care budgets since 2010. Older and disabled people are paying the price. Labour has set out plans for social care budgets since 2010. We are providing dignity in old age. When will the Secretary of State give people the dignity and care they deserve, and bring forward the Government’s plans for social care?

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): The hon. Lady will be aware that the Queen’s Speech announced a Bill to tackle the cost of adult social care. She will also know that the Prime Minister said on the steps of Downing Street that the Government will set out plans to fix the social care crisis once and for all. We need to get through Brexit, and Labour Members need to vote for the methods that will help us to deliver that, because we can then get on to the things in life that really matter, such as ensuring that no one will ever have to use their home to pay for their care.

T9. Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): I thank the Secretary of State very much for agreeing to increase the amount awarded to the Alex—Alexandra Hospital—to £175 million. Will he tell me when the upgrade works will begin?

Mark Menzies (Fylde) (Con): I welcome the announcement of Royal Preston Hospital being included in the hospital upgrades programme, but what plans does the Minister have for Blackpool Victoria Hospital, where services such as ophthalmics are now over capacity and could do with some additional investment?

The Minister for Health (Edward Argar): As Members will know, my hon. Friend the Member for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley), our Front-Bench spokesperson, and say that you have been a fantastic Speaker? You and I first got together on the Trade and Industry Committee about 20 years ago, and I recall, before you became Speaker, suggesting to you that you might want to stand for Speaker—I bet you have forgotten that one. Anyway, I wish you and your family all the best for the future. You have always been very fair and very helpful to me, and I think you will be missed in this Chamber, despite what your opponents say.

I will come on to more serious matters now. We were promised by the previous Chancellor that the doctors’ pensions tax would be sorted out. He said that he was in negotiations, but this has been raised repeatedly and nothing has happened so far. Doctors are not putting in overtime, patients are suffering and the NHS could be in meltdown this winter. What is the Secretary of State going to do about it?

Rachel Maclean: Getting this right is incredibly important. The change in the guidance last month allows every single NHS trust to introduce the flexibilities, immediately, to ensure that doctors can do the work and the overtime they need, get paid properly for it and not get penalised through the impact on the pensions system. That change came in at the start of last month. I will write to the hon. Gentleman with the details, so that he can tell all doctors that these flexibilities are available so that they can do the work that they need to.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): The Secretary of State says that the NHS is not on the table, but President Trump and his trade officials have been very clear that they will seek to more than double drug prices, driving up the bill from £18 billion to £45 billion a year. What discussions is the Secretary of State having, and does he accept that this is why devolved Governments must have input in trade deals?

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Earlier this year, the Secretary of State spoke about the importance of introducing new financing mechanisms to develop and deploy drugs and vaccines to tackle antimicrobial resistance. Will he update us on that, please?

Rachel Maclean: Yes. In January, with my hon. Friend’s support, we launched the five-year plan to tackle antimicrobial resistance. We have now taken that to a global level; this is a global problem. We have appointed Dame Sally Davies, who recently stood down as the chief medical officer, to be our AMR tsar so that she can continue the drive both domestically and around the world.
Edward Argar: The hon. Gentleman will be pleased to hear that that is exactly what we have done with the health infrastructure plan, which involves multi-year capital funding settlements and investment in our hospitals. I am happy to discuss separately the specific example he raises.

Stephen McPartland (Stevenage) (Con): There are more than 1.5 million people in Hertfordshire and Bedfordshire, and they have no access to a radiotherapy facility in either county. Will the Minister agree to bring cancer care closer to people’s homes and join the campaign to establish a satellite radiotherapy unit in Stevenage?

Edward Argar: My hon. Friend is a strong local champion for his constituents in Stevenage, particularly on that issue, in which he is joined by my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald), who is sitting next to him. He is right to highlight the importance of easy access to such facilities. I am happy to meet him and my right hon. and learned Friend to discuss that.

T4. [900221] Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): After almost a decade of ideological Tory austerity and underfunding of our NHS, A&E waiting times at Bradford Royal Infirmary have soared, with one in four patients admitted last winter waiting longer than the four-hour target. Patients in Bradford deserve better than being left to suffer in A&E departments and in the back of ambulances. Will the Minister meet me to discuss emergency funding for Bradford NHS services, to avoid another winter crisis?

Matt Hancock: We are putting record amounts of funding into the NHS across the country, including in Bradford. If the people of Bradford get their election—if Labour Members vote for it—and they want to know what is the best thing to do to support long-term investment in the NHS, I can tell them that it is to support the only true party of the NHS: the Conservatives.

Stephen Metcalfe (South Basildon and East Thurrock) (Con): I note the recent announcement of the roll-out of the electronic prescription service. How will that benefit my constituents? When will it be rolled out, and how can my constituents use it to support their local community pharmacy?

Mr Speaker: Preferably in a sentence—Jo Churchill.

Jo Churchill: Digitising the process by using electronic prescribing will save the national health service up to £300 million, freeing up vital time for GPs and pharmacists to spend with their patients. It will start on 19 November.

Mr Speaker: Splendid.

T5. [900222] Stuart C. McDonald (Cumbernauld, Kilsyth and Kirkintilloch East) (SNP): The Government have finally completed their consultation on mandatory fortification of flour with folic acid. When can we finally expect to see that eminently sensible policy implemented?

Jo Churchill: That was part of the prevention Green Paper. We have the consultation responses, which we will assess and come forward with proposals.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Ind): There is still too much reliance on body mass index as an indicator of good health in sufferers of eating disorders. Will the Secretary of State get behind the “Dump the Scales” campaign and meet the indomitable campaigner Hope Virgo, to ensure that GPs realise there is more to eating disorders than just weight?

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Ms Nadine Dorries): I thank my right hon. Friend for her question. The National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines state clearly that GPs should not use BMI as the sole indicator for treatment. I have just met the eating disorder charity Beat to discuss how we approach eating disorders. With the £2.3 billion that we have invested in mental health services, we have made a commitment that any young person presenting with an acute eating disorder will be seen within one week, and others within four weeks.

T6. [900223] Laura Smith (Crewe and Nantwich) (Lab): The right to challenge decisions about care and support is fundamental, and the system for doing that must be fair and consistent across all local authorities. Will the Secretary of State make it his policy to introduce a statutory social care appeals process for the decisions made about an individual’s care and support?

Matt Hancock: That is an incredibly important matter. It was addressed in the Care Act 2014, but I am happy to look at any proposals, because it is important that we get fair treatment right across the country.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I ask Members for one-sentence questions from now on.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): Does the Health Secretary agree with the joint report produced by the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee and the Health and Social Care Committee that the best way to fund adult social care is through a social care premium?

Matt Hancock: The joint report was excellent.
Matt Hancock: As we discussed in the answer to an earlier question, I have both decriminalised the use of cannabis oil and introduced the National Institute for Health Research clinical trials. However, individual rules about prescriptions have to be for individual clinicians, and when it comes to funding it in Scotland, that has to be a matter for the Scottish NHS.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Will the Secretary of State look at making greater use of chiropractors and osteopaths in support of orthopaedic surgeons?

Matt Hancock: How could I say no as my wife was an osteopath? I understand very strongly the importance and value of those professions.

T10. [900227] Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): The Royal College of Surgeons reports today that 61% of consultant surgeons have been told not to take up waiting list time reduction initiatives over the winter because of the NHS tax trap. Will the Secretary of State please engage with the Treasury and appeal to it to sort this out before waiting lists are exacerbated over the winter months?

Matt Hancock: I am of course engaged with the Treasury on this, but I would also say that these flexibilities are available right across the country and they must be used by trusts.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: We are all grateful to the national health service, but I know that the right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) has spoken movingly of the particular debt of gratitude he owes to the institution.

James Brokenshire (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): I am delighted to echo that again in the context of the fact that next month, November, is Lung Cancer Awareness Month. I ask my right hon. Friend to commend the Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation and all those who are highlighting the signs of this disease to save lives, quite literally, because of the need for early diagnosis. Equally, could he update the House on the lung health checks programme, which is targeted screening that could quite literally save lives from this terrible disease?

Jo Churchill: Along with my right hon. Friend, I pay tribute to the Roy Castle Lung Cancer Foundation, but also to all the charities that work in the cancer space and do the most tremendous work on awareness raising, because it is only by awareness raising that we can actually get earlier diagnoses and beat this disease. We are looking very seriously at what my right hon. Friend suggests.

Dr Sarah Wollaston (Totnes) (LD): May I thank you, Mr Speaker, for all the support you have given to Select Committees during your time in the Chair?

After a long period of engagement with patients, staff and partner organisations, the NHS has come up with a clear set of recommendations to the Government and Parliament for the legislative reforms it needs. I hope all political parties are listening to that. Will the Secretary of State confirm that he will accept all its recommendations, including the one that recommends scrapping section 75 of the Health and Social Care Act 2012 and other provisions, which would end wasteful contracting rounds in the NHS?

Matt Hancock: I want to pay tribute to the hon. Lady for the work that she, her Health Committee and all its members have done on this legislation. I think that the legislation proposed by the NHS—with the support of the Select Committee, which will of course scrutinise it further—is an important step forward. I am delighted that Her Majesty committed in the Queen’s Speech to legislation on the NHS, of which these proposals will be the basis.

Mr Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): Haslemere in my constituency has a busy minor injuries unit, used by 8,000 people a year, which is currently threatened with closure. Given that that would be catastrophic for the town of Haslemere and for the Royal Surrey A&E in Guildford, will the Secretary of State listen to the residents of Haslemere and agree not to close this vital facility?

Matt Hancock: My predecessor, my right hon. Friend, is an assiduous campaigner for South West Surrey. There is no better spokesman for South West Surrey than my right hon. Friend. He has raised this issue with me in private over recent weeks since these concerns were raised. I have in turn raised it with the chief executive of the NHS, and I can confirm that the walk-in centre will stay open.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): The primary care mental health service in York is not being cut; it is being scrapped. Will the Secretary of State urgently meet me to save this service?

Ms Dorries: I am happy to help and to meet the hon. Lady to talk about that. No primary care mental health services should be cutting given the amount of funding we are putting in, but I am happy to meet and discuss it with her.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I must say to the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) that my kids think he is a great bloke because he made an effort to go and talk to them at my party last week. He will always be a hero in their eyes.

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): Does my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State share my concern that a highly paid health executive has been made redundant by Southend clinical commissioning group, given £200,000 and then employed somewhere else in the organisation? Disgraceful.

Matt Hancock: Today is the first time I have heard of this. National health service redundancy terms were capped at £160,000 in April 2015. We consulted on bringing that down to £95,000 and we have introduced powers in primary legislation to claw back contractual redundancy payments when someone returns to any public sector job within 12 months. I will raise the individual case with the NHS to ensure that taxpayers’ money is being used as well as possible.
Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): Will the Secretary of State speak to his colleagues in the Home Office and get them to allow Glasgow City health and social care partnership to open a supervised drug consumption room in my constituency and get vulnerable people into a service that will keep them alive?

Jo Churchill: We currently have no plans to change the law on drug consumption rooms. We support a range of evidence-based approaches to reducing the health-related harms associated with drug misuse. I keenly await the summit in Glasgow, which will focus on tackling problem drug use and bring together the experts we need. Dame Carol Black’s report is out in the next few weeks, but putting better resources into treatment and recovery is vital and I urge the Scottish Government to invest.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Will the Secretary of State visit Wycombe Hospital to discuss the future of our increasingly tired 1960s tower block?

Matt Hancock: I am absolutely happy to look at that. We have put in place the health infrastructure plan to ensure that there is a long-term plan for replacing ailing hospitals. That includes the ability to make new proposals that were not announced in the first round. I am happy to visit Wycombe, which is a beautiful town.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): The Government have repeatedly turned down plans for both a new health centre in Maghull and a new walk-in centre in Southport. Is not electing a Labour Government the only way my constituents and those of Members across the House will get the new facilities they so badly need?

Matt Hancock: On the contrary. I was in Southport last month and I saw the fantastic staff and what they do. I was able to talk to them about the improvements that we are planning in Southport. People in Southport and across the country know that unless we have a strong economy we cannot fund a strong NHS. The Labour party’s plans for the economy would sink it. Only with a strong Conservative Government can we have a properly funded NHS.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I say to the right hon. Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois) that when we stood against each other in Conservative student politics in 1986, I was the candidate of the right and he was the candidate of the left. Some things change over the years.

Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): Mr Speaker, you won. Although we have not agreed on everything in the 18 years I have been in the House, I say most earnestly, from one midget to another, that I wish you a long and happy retirement.

Following the question of my hon. Friend the Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), I point out that the individual he mentioned moved from being the accountable officer of the Southend CCG to the accountable officer of the Thurrock CCG. It was a sideways move for which he trousered a fifth of a million pounds of public money, which should have been spent on patients. Do not just cap the payment, sir, make him pay it back.

Matt Hancock: Again, we have the powers in primary legislation to claw back contractual redundancy payments. Nobody is keener to ensure the careful expenditure of taxpayers’ money than my right hon. Friend. The matter has been raised very powerfully by the voices of Essex in this question time.

Several hon. Members rose—

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I was very distressed to learn last week that a higher than average number of people in Hull are having foot amputations, partly because of diabetic foot ulcers and despite excellent work by the vascular department. The message from that department is that it is underfunded, under-resourced and in desperate need of an infrastructure upgrade to its theatre. Time is running out, so instead of asking the Secretary of State to meet me, will he just act very quickly to give it the funding it needs to stop unnecessary amputations happening in Hull?

Matt Hancock: We have the largest infrastructure investment programme in a generation and I am very happy to look at the specific request from Hull to ensure it gets the infrastructure it needs.
Leaving the EU: Workers’ Rights

12.50 pm

Laura Pidcock (North West Durham) (Lab) (Urgent question): To ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy if she will make a statement on the Government’s plans for workers’ rights after the UK leaves the EU.

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrea Leadsom): The UK has a long and proud tradition of leading the way in workers’ rights and for setting the highest standards. The Government have been clear and consistent that the decision to leave the EU does not change that in any way whatever. The Government have absolutely no intention of lowering standards on workers’ rights. To suggest otherwise is scaremongering and is untrue.

The EU has traditionally set minimum standards for workers’ rights and, as all colleagues in this Chamber would expect, the UK already exceeds standards in a wide range of areas, such as maternity and paternity leave and pay. The UK offers 39 weeks of statutory maternity pay, compared with the 14 weeks of paid maternity leave required by the EU’s minimum standards. Because the Government believe in the importance of supporting families in every possible way, we have also given fathers and partners an additional statutory right to leave and pay, something that the EU is only now starting to consider. We are one of the few EU member states to have introduced shared parental leave and we are proud that in the UK we have given all employees with 26 weeks qualifying service a statutory right to request flexible working that enables so many to better balance work and life responsibilities. EU law only allows workers to make such a request if returning from parental leave.

Under the terms of the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, all existing workers’ rights laws will be transferred into domestic law once we have left the EU, making sure there is no gap or lack of clarity in the minimum set of workers’ rights which, as I have already said, the UK exceeds in many areas. We are also including in the Withdrawal Agreement Bill a new requirement that every Bill brought before this place in the future that affects workers’ rights will include a statement by the Government of the day on how it impacts workers’ rights. This will ensure that Parliament always has its say. The Government have also published clauses that will require every Government, now and in the future, to monitor new EU legislation covering employment and workplace health and safety standards, and to report on those changes to Parliament so that Parliament can again have its say.

In direct answer to the hon. Lady’s question, I can absolutely assure her and this House that the Government will not lower standards on workers’ rights when we leave the EU. On the contrary, it is the ambition of this Government to make the United Kingdom the best place to work and to grow a business.

Laura Pidcock: Thank you for granting this urgent question, Mr Speaker. I persisted.

The leaked memos reported in the Financial Times over the weekend are both worrying and, at the same time, utterly predictable. They shine a light on the true politics of this Conservative Government and how they are seeking to use the withdrawal agreement Bill, as with their whole Brexit strategy, to sell out workers. The Prime Minister may keep repeating that it is an excellent deal, and no doubt that will be the mantra come a general election, but I would like to get to the truth. I want to start by asking the Secretary of State about the status of the documents, and particularly which Government Departments they were distributed to and when. At what stage was the Secretary of State aware of their existence and their content? If she was not aware, why not?

This issue is critical given that last week the Government gave a number of assurances on this issue to Members in this House, while at the same time they were seemingly discussing the very opposite among themselves. They will use Brexit as a blueprint for rapid deregulation, which will see the vital floor on protections disappear. This Government have proposed a Brexit deal that benefits their pals—the millionaires, the speculators and hedge fund managers—over working people. [Interruption.] Government Members can shout at me all they want, but that is the truth. How can we trust a Prime Minister who stood up and said they would keep the “highest possible standards” on workers’ rights, when the leaks show that the Government view such commitments as “inappropriate” and that negotiators had “successfully resisted” them being included in the legally binding part of the agreement with the EU? These rights are not inappropriate; they include things such as maternity leave, working hours, paid holiday leave—things that make a difference in people’s lives.

The Secretary of State says that the Government do not intend to dilute rights after we leave the EU. May I then ask her very simply: why did they take level playing field obligations out of the legally binding part of their Brexit agreement? Crucially, has the Secretary of State’s Department or the Cabinet Office ever looked at deregulation? If so, why? We need to get to the bottom of this. The Government are relying on the complexity of the legislation to bury their true approach to workers’ rights. Once we expose exactly the consequences of their approach to leaving the EU and what it means for our communities, they know that the Government could never win support of this House and, more importantly, of working people. Rather than resisting workers’ rights, we need a fundamental shift in power from the owners of business to workers. It is only a Labour Government who will ever do that.

Andrea Leadsom: Well, Mr Speaker, that was incredibly disappointing. The hon. Lady obviously was not listening to a thing I said. If she will allow me, I will just repeat what I actually said, rather than what she asserts I said. It is this Government’s ambition to make the United Kingdom the best place in the world to work.

I find it extraordinary that the hon. Lady thinks that the only valid protector of UK workers’ rights can be the European Union. Why on earth does she think that her party, my party, the other Opposition parties and our strong trade union tradition in the UK are utterly incapable of building on the superb tradition we already have in the UK of exceeding workers’ rights in the EU in so many areas? Once we have left the European Union, the United Kingdom will not be represented in EU institutions and nor will we have any direct influence.
on future EU legislation on workers’ rights. Why then should the Government and this Parliament seek to engineer circumstances where we are required to implement legislation over which we have had no say?

As we leave the European Union, we have a unique opportunity to enhance protections for the workforce and tailor them to best support UK workers. It will be for the United Kingdom to create and enhance UK employment rights and to take advantage of the superb opportunities for new UK-wide skills, jobs and prosperity that await us after we have left the European Union.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Most eccentric behaviour by the hon. Member for Hitchin and Harpenden (Bim Afolami). It is not necessary to raise one’s hand, as though in a classroom. It is quite sufficient for the hon. Gentleman simply to stand. I do not know what he did when he was at Eton, but he does not have to worry about that now. I am glad there is a beauteous smile on the face of the hon. Gentleman. That itself is a source of some solace.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): May I say to my right hon. Friend that the question from the hon. Member for North West Durham (Laura Pidcock) is completely at odds with reality? If Labour Members look very carefully at wanting to remain in the EU, it is the judgments of the European Court of Justice that Professor Mary Davis of Royal Holloway, University of London—a Labour historian—has said will be a thunderclap to the left, because, with imported workers, they put business rights over workers’ rights. So, if this case is exactly what they say it is, they should be wanting to accelerate our departure from the EU to get back full control of workers’ rights to the UK.

Andrea Leadson: My right hon. Friend is absolutely right. He has done so much to promote social justice in the United Kingdom and he deserves respect from right across this place. What I would say to my right hon. Friend is that one of the EU’s own agencies, Eurofound—Opposition Members obviously do not want to hear this, because they are all chatting—ranks the United Kingdom as the second-best country in the EU for workplace wellbeing, second only to Sweden, and the best for workplace performance. That is something to be proud of.

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): Despite the Secretary of State’s energetic assertions, make no mistake: the Prime Minister’s deal is disastrous for workers’ rights. Scottish workers and industry now make no mistake: the Prime Minister’s deal is disastrous and other vital standards. The Tories can never be trusted for workers’ rights. Scottish workers and industry now make no mistake: the Prime Minister’s deal is disastrous.

So, if this case is exactly what they say it is, they should said will be a thunderclap to the left, because, with imported workers, they put business rights over workers’ rights. If not, why not?

Andrea Leadson: The hon. Gentleman describes my defence of our ambitions on workers’ rights as energetic. It also happens to be true, which is extremely helpful to workers in the United Kingdom. Let us look at the facts. He asserts that somehow the EU is the only thing that lies between us and the poor house, but in reality there is no minimum wage in the EU, whereas this Government are raising the national minimum wage to £10.50 an hour. UK annual holiday entitlement is 28 days, including our public holidays; in the EU it is 20 days. Our maternity entitlements are nearly three times greater than those in the EU. We have given fathers and partners statutory rights to leave and pay. We have given adoption leave. We have given employees the right to request flexible working. In every single area, the UK far exceeds the European Union. It is absolute and total rubbish to say that the EU is the only protector of UK workers’ rights.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): Could we turn to practical matters for a moment? Most of our constituents are in work, have worked or are related to people in work. It would be a pretty eccentric and perverse prospectus to say to our voters, “Please vote for us. We are going to make your working life worse, your standards lower and your environment less safe.” Given the practical, non-ideological politics of Government Members, does my right hon. Friend agree that would be a very strange political message indeed?

Andrea Leadson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. To give some further cheery news, 80% of jobs created since 2010 are full-time jobs. The introduction of the national living wage delivered the fastest pay rise in at least 20 years for the lowest earners. [Interruption.] The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) might like to look at the facts rather than listen to the rhetoric coming from Opposition Members. If people want good work, good workers’ rights and decent wages, they should stick with the Conservatives.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Asking people to trust the Conservative party is a bit like asking them to trust Dracula with the blood bank. We know what its record is.

Will the right hon. Lady talk about enforcement? We can have all the rights we like on paper, but this Government and their predecessors have slashed enforcement to the bone, which has meant that an awful lot of the so-called rights that people have at work are theoretical and do not exist in practice.

Andrea Leadson: The hon. Lady knows that that is simply not the case. Since 2015 the Government have doubled the budget for enforcement on compliance with the minimum wage. The enforcement activity of Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs has meant that 200,000 workers could access nearly £25 million in national minimum wage arrears in 2018-19. The employment agency standards inspectorate has received a 50% increase in frontline inspectors. We are investing more than £1 billion in reforming the Courts and Tribunals Service. The hon. Lady is asserting non-facts; I am giving her the facts and she should listen to them.
Margot James (Stourbridge) (Ind): I welcome my right hon. Friend’s commitment to the UK becoming the best place in the world in which to work and grow a business. Does she agree that we need to consider the way in which employment protection and the tribunals system impact on those in low paid and insecure employment in particular?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes. My hon. Friend is absolutely right. We have consulted on proposals for a single enforcement body for employment rights. That consultation closed on 6 October and the Government will respond to it. She will know very well that this Government are committed to extending, improving and enforcing some of the best workers’ rights in the world.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am going to call a Member who cannot be improved in any way: Alison McGovern.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): I am not sure how much of a favour you have done me there, Mr Speaker. The truth is that the reality of our labour market is that lived by my constituents, not the picture being painted from the Dispatch Box. But never mind that: this is about Brexit and what it could do to our economy. The Secretary of State claims the mantle of the person who will defend family rights at work and people’s ability to defend themselves against poor bosses. Will she therefore clarify whether the TUC has recommended that we accept the Government’s deal—yes or no?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will know better than I the TUC’s view of the Government’s deal. She says that the reality is not the same as what I am saying from the Dispatch Box, but she should recognise that almost 32.7 million people are in work, including a further 280,000 over the past year; that 80% of jobs created since 2010 are full-time jobs; and that we have experienced the fastest growth in real earnings since 2015. The hon. Lady should listen to the facts and not try to scaremonger. This Government are improving and protecting workers’ rights and enhancing enforcement of them.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Anyone who has travelled in the European Union will know that conditions of employment in the UK are higher, particularly on contracts of employment, as well as the other points made by my right hon. Friend. Does she therefore share my suspicion that this UQ is motivated not by care for people’s employment rights, but more by the fact that we face, possibly, a general election?

Andrea Leadsom: I have to say that I completely agree with my hon. Friend. Because what I am hearing from Opposition Members does not resemble any of the facts. It is this Conservative Government who are protecting and enhancing the rights of the workforce and ensuring a benign economic situation, which means that more people than ever before are in work, more women are in work, fewer young people are out of work, and wages are rising. We are also ensuring that employment is safe and more secure and that health and safety rules are strong. It is the Opposition who seem to be positioning themselves for a general election.

Chris Williamson (Derby North) (Ind): If the Secretary of State is serious about making Britain the best place in the world to work, will she commit to scrapping the anti-trade union legislation? The undermining of trade unions over the past 10 years or so has led to an explosion of precarious low-paid employment, which is now endemic throughout the land.

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman will be aware that, in leaving the European Union with the withdrawal agreement negotiated by the Prime Minister, if the European Union makes any changes to workers’ rights and employment legislation, the Government will have the facility to consult businesses and trade unions, and this House will be able to express its view on whether any changes could or should be considered for implementation in the UK. It is really important that it is this House and the United Kingdom’s courts that should judge and measure whether this or any future Government stick to their commitment to maintain the highest standards of workers’ rights.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Ind): One way in which the Government could show that they are not only committed to workers’ rights but innovative in the field of workers’ rights is to look carefully at what rights we might extend to workers in the so-called gig economy, which has emerged from the success of tech in the UK. Will the Secretary of State update the House on the progress in looking at the Taylor report and on her thoughts on this important area of the economy?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend raises a really important point. In terms of zero-hours contracts and the gig economy, the number of people on zero-hours contracts is falling, and less than 3% of the people in work are employed on them. He mentions the Taylor report. Matthew Taylor said that banning zero-hours contracts would be like using “a sledgehammer to crack a nut”. However, it is important that we do everything we can to ensure that workers have the flexibility they need, so we have consulted on one-sided flexibility. That consultation closed on 11 October and we will bring forward our response soon.

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): There is no guarantee from this Government that UK employment rights will keep track with EU employment protections. For example, the gig economy was just mentioned, and the European Commission recently launched proposals to introduce transparent and predictable working conditions for gig economy workers, such as those on zero-hours contracts or in domestic employment. Is it also planning other additional protections, so will the Secretary of State promise that that will happen here and that we will keep in track with EU developments?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady for raising that very important point. She is right that the EU has discussed the gig economy and enhancing the rights of working parents. It is true that the EU has introduced proposals in the transparent and predictable working conditions directive, but it is not true that those proposals go further than the good work plan. For example, we brought forward a statutory instrument
in March this year under which the right to a written statement on day one for every worker will come into force in April 2020, whereas under the EU’s proposals, if it does introduce that directive, it will not take effect until the summer of 2022, so the UK is bringing forward workers’ rights further and faster than the European Union.

Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The Prime Minister championed the London living wage and a much higher national living wage. Does that not demonstrate his commitment to increased workers’ rights?

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. This Prime Minister has been extremely keen to ensure that all workers get a fair deal. He has presided over the intention to bring the national minimum wage to £10.50 at a greater speed than was previously envisaged. We will bring forward measures to ensure that that can be put into force as soon as we can.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): The level playing field clause would not constrain any improvement in workers’ rights, but it would limit and stop the reduction of workers’ rights, so why did the Prime Minister want that clause to be removed from the legally binding withdrawal agreement?

Andrea Leadsom: The right hon. Gentleman is absolutely right: the EU sets minimum workers’ rights that all EU members abide by, and the UK then, like many other member states, improves on that—in the UK’s case, very significantly. Under our withdrawal agreement Bill and in a no-deal situation, all existing workers’ rights will be protected, but the UK does not intend necessarily to dynamically align with all future EU legislation. When I say that, I mean that this House will have the opportunity to look at all measures that come forward, but in many areas the UK will want to do things better than the EU. Dynamic alignment means copy and paste, and we do not want to have to do that. I just gave an example to the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) of an area in which the UK is introducing the right to a day one statement much faster than the EU. That is an example of our wanting to go further and faster in improving workers’ rights.

Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): The purpose of leaving the European Union is not to have a bonfire of workers’ rights, but to make decisions in this House. Does my right hon. Friend agree that outside the EU, this House of Commons can pass such legislation to improve workers’ rights? We should have the confidence to do so and not leave it to others.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right. It is for this House, the UK’s trade unions and the UK’s parliamentarians of all parties to preserve and enhance workforce rights in the UK for everybody within it in a way that is tailored to the extraordinary opportunities that await us as we leave the EU.

Melanie Onn (Great Grimsby) (Lab): Yesterday, I and a number of my colleagues signed early-day motion 57, in the name of my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field), as a public indication of support for the withdrawal agreement Bill through which we would have been able to secure some amendments that would give peace of mind, hopefully to Labour colleagues, that workers’ rights would not be undermined after we leave the EU. Does the Business Secretary share my disappointment that rather than bringing the Bill through this House, enabling us all to talk about these things and trying to get the strongest amendments possible, the Prime Minister has instead chosen to pull his Bill?

Andrea Leadsom: I have the greatest respect and regard for the hon. Lady, and I am sorry to say that on this I disagree with her. If Parliament really did intend to provide the opportunity for the withdrawal agreement Bill to have its Third Reading and Royal Assent, this House would also have supported the timetable to do that. Unfortunately, the fact that so few colleagues, on both sides of the House, decided to support the programme motion means that it undermined its own credibility and willingness to bring that Bill to its conclusion.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): The Secretary of State will have seen the EU report that says that 90% of economic growth in the next 15 years will be outside the EU. The United Kingdom therefore has to make decisions in line with its national interest that lead to more jobs, opportunities, prosperity and security. That is what we have been seeing for the last nine years that this Conservative Government have been in place.

Andrea Leadsom: My hon. Friend is exactly right: a very bright future awaits us as we leave the European Union in all circumstances. From the amazing innovations in areas such as healthier, longer living through our life sciences agenda, to areas such as clean growth through our commitment to net zero, there are massive opportunities for new skills, new jobs and new prosperity across the United Kingdom. This Conservative Government will maintain and enhance workers’ rights for all.

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): As one of the Labour MPs who have worked in good faith to find common ground—a compromise, even—over Brexit, I was disappointed to read the leaked documents. Further to the answers that the Minister has given to a number of hon. Members, will she tell us exactly what workplace rights and protections would be introduced to prevent the Government from backtracking on the commitments that they have made?

Andrea Leadsom: Again, I have a great deal of respect for the hon. Lady’s position. I absolutely assure her that it is the Government’s intention to maintain all the workers’ rights regulations as we leave the EU and to ensure that Parliament has the opportunity, in every piece of primary legislation that comes forward in future, to understand—with a statement by the Government—how that might impact on workers’ rights, so that it can express its view. At the same time, the Government of the day will consult trade unions and businesses on whether the impact is positive or negative. There will be the opportunity either to align with those changes in legislation and improve on them, as the United Kingdom so often does, or not to implement them if they are not appropriate for the UK, but it should be for this place to make that decision.
Bim Afolami: Does the Secretary of State agree that if the Prime Minister's deal, negotiated with the European Union, is ratified by this House, on leaving the EU the UK will have better and stronger workers' rights than the bare bones provided by the EU?

Andrea Leadsom: Yes, my hon. Friend is exactly right.

Hugh Gaffney: The Tory party talks about protecting workers. Thomas Cook: no say and no pay. Asda: sign or resign. Royal Mail: agreements made but not honoured. Where are the intervention from the Tory Government? They are proud of that fact and have every intention of further enhancing those rights.

Andrew Percy: As the Secretary of State pointed out, parties on both sides have expanded workers' rights far beyond the EU minimums, so will she go further and call out this campaign for what it is—a grubby attempt to divide employees from employers and a deliberate politically motivated campaign of misinformation? Moreover, it is deeply insulting to the British electorate to suggest that they are incapable of electing people to this place who share their aims and intentions in wanting to go further in protecting workers' rights.

Andrew Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman is not correct. There are protections for workers' rights in UK legislation. As I have explained to many right hon. and hon. Members, the UK's protections and rights for workers go far beyond any of the EU's minimum standards. We are proud of that fact and have every intention of further enhancing those rights.

Lady Hermon: The right hon. Lady will know that responsibility for workers' rights is a devolved matter for the Northern Ireland Assembly. She will also know that we have not had a functioning Assembly for almost three years. The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has been dedicated to the restoration of the Assembly and Executive, but his valiant efforts are now being deliberately and willfully undermined by the Prime Minister's stunt of an early general election. How on earth does the Business Secretary reconcile the Secretary of State's efforts to have the institutions restored in Northern Ireland with the Prime Minister's stunt of an early general election?

Andrea Leadsom: My right hon. Friend the Secretary of State is in his place and will have heard the hon. Lady's comments. The parties in Northern Ireland have had ample opportunity to come together, and the Prime Minister, like his predecessor, has sought at every turn to find an accommodation so that all parties in Northern Ireland can restore the Assembly. It is a top priority for this Parliament, but so too is delivering on the will of the people in the 2016 referendum. It is not acceptable that we have yet to deliver on the decision by the United Kingdom to leave the EU. We must do so.

Chris Stephens: A speech the Secretary of State gave in 2012 contains this passage about small business:

“I envisage there being absolutely no regulation whatsoever—no minimum wage, no maternity or paternity rights, no unfair dismissal rights, no pension rights”—[Official Report, 10 May 2012; Vol. 545, c. 209.]

It is no wonder we are suspicious on these Benches. If the European Commission provides protections on zero-hours contracts, childcare provision and leave that are stronger than those in the Taylor report, will the UK Government match them or deviate?

Andrea Leadsom: In each of the areas the hon. Gentleman has mentioned, the UK already provides enhanced rights to workers. The Government are proud of their record on improving workers' rights and will seek to continue that record as we leave the EU.

Gareth Snell: As a Member who voted for Second Reading of the withdrawal Bill, I say to the Secretary of State that it is at best confused and at worst slightly disingenuous to put more weight on the programme motion vote than on the principle of the Bill going forward, which many of us supported, as a reason for not bringing the Bill back.

On workers' rights, I welcome the Secretary of State's ambition, but under this Government the qualifying period for entitlement to a tribunal doubled, tribunal fees were introduced and the Trade Union Act 2016 introduced. If the Government were serious about putting these provisions into law, she would strengthen clause 31 of the withdrawal Bill, ensure a clear role for the TUC and not just workers' representatives, recognise that the comments of my hon. Friends the Members for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) and for Great Grimsby (Melanie Onn) were aimed at improving the Bill and ultimately give the House the chance to vote on it.

Andrea Leadsom: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman for his personal efforts to support the resolution of committing to the will of the people in the 2016 referendum. I know it has been difficult for him personally and I sincerely pay tribute to him.

Under the good work plan, the Government are committed to taking forward 51 of Matthew Taylor's 53 recommendations, including improving the clarity of employment status checks and introducing proposals for a single enforcement body for employment rights and a right to request a more predictable contract. And of course we have introduced a tipping Bill to ensure that employees can keep their hard-earned tips. At every level, the Government show their desire and willingness to enhance workers' rights. On the hon. Gentleman's specific point about trade unions, we have given a commitment that when a Bill is introduced that affects workers' rights, the Government will be required to consult businesses and trade unions, and have to seek Parliament's view on whether that should be reciprocated in UK law.
Mr Sam Gyimah (East Surrey) (LD): The Secretary of State’s words ring hollow simply because workers’ rights were in the legally binding withdrawal agreement and have now been moved into the political declaration. But her reassurances ring hollow for another reason: the logic of leaving the EU to look for new trade deals is that whatever we want will come at the price of what the other country wants. The desire for a US trade deal as a political trophy would that mean workers’ rights could be traded away. Can she assure us that that will not happen in our pursuit of a US trade deal, if the Prime Minister’s deal were to pass?

Andrea Leadsom: I find that intervention from the hon. Gentleman, of all people, quite shameful. As an ex-Conservative Minister, he will be aware of the Government’s proud record of, and commitment to, enhancing workers’ rights and protections. It is disingenuous to suggest otherwise.

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): I understand what the Secretary of State says about new legislation introduced by the EU, of course existing rules from the EU are not static and can be interpreted and changed, for example by European Court of Justice judgments. If the ECJ does interpret an existing employment right in a way that is favourable to the employee, will the Government legislate to enhance that in UK law as well?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. As I have tried to explain to other right hon. and hon. Members, whenever a new piece of EU legislation is brought into force, the Government will provide a report to the House so that the House can express its opinion on whether it enhances, reduces or changes workers’ rights, and when a Bill is introduced in this place that affects employees’ rights, there will be a requirement to consult businesses and trade unions on any impact, for better or worse, on workers’ rights. It will be for this House to decide what gets taken forward.

Ruth Smeeth (Stoke-on-Trent North) (Lab): The Secretary of State has repeatedly discussed pay inflation in response to questions. The west midlands TUC has today published pay level analysis. My constituents are across Whitehall.

Andrea Leadsom: Again, I pay tribute to the hon. Lady for her efforts to get the withdrawal agreement Bill through the House. However, I must disagree with her. It is this Government who are committing to raising the national minimum wage to £10.50. We introduced the national living wage, our changes in the tax free allowance have taken millions of people out of tax altogether, and real wages are rising at their fastest level since 2015. There have been real increases in take-home pay for millions of workers, which is absolutely vital. This Government will always do everything we can to retain and enhance the rights of workers.

Mr Speaker: Jim Shannon.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP) rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. I called the wrong Jim. No disrespect to the hon. Member for Strangford, but I should have called Jim Cunningham. [Laughter.] I say to the hon. Member for Strangford, you are a very great man, sir, but I was originally going to call Mr Cunningham. We will come to you; don’t worry. I am saving you up.

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. We now have a situation, under this Government, where we actually have the working poor. We all want to know what the Government’s intentions are regarding workers’ rights. All we have to look at is the Trade Union Bill that one of the Leader of the House’s colleagues tried to take through the House last year. What value or credibility can we give to any of the Government’s commitments on workers’ rights?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman talks about the plight of workers. He will know that there are nearly 33 million people in work—an increase of 280,000 since last year—that 80% of jobs created since 2010 are full-time jobs, that real wages are rising, and that the Government are committed to increasing the national living wage to £10.50 an hour. Those are all incredibly important steps to give workers better rights and better conditions.

Jim Shannon: Will the Business Secretary confirm the rights of NHS staff who are skilled but do not meet the “highly skilled” threshold?

Andrea Leadsom: You have just called two of my favourite Jims in the world, Mr Speaker. It is absolutely the case that the UK will always ensure that the immigration system is fair to the United Kingdom’s needs for a skilled workforce, but also fair to those around the world who would like to come here to contribute to our economy and to our fantastic NHS.

Liz McInnes (Heywood and Middleton) (Lab): To understand the Government’s real attitude to workers’ rights, we need only look at the treatment of the Interserve workers at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Those cooks, cleaners and porters have been engaged in a long-standing dispute over terms and conditions and pay, and over the recognition of their trade union, the Public and Commercial Services Union. The Secretary of State talked about strong trade unions earlier, yet the Foreign and Commonwealth Office will not recognise the PCS. If the Government are really serious about workers’ rights, why have they allowed this dispute to run and run?

Andrea Leadsom: I am sure the hon. Lady will be delighted to know that in my own Department there has been a dispute resolution. It is obviously important for trade unions always to represent the workforce, but it is also important for the discussions that take place to be respectful on all sides, and I know that that is the case across Whitehall.

Gerald Jones (Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney) (Lab): We have heard plenty of words from the Dispatch Box today but, when it comes to workers’ rights, is it not the case that the British public do not trust a word that the
Tories say? Is it not also the case that the Government wish to use this deal to dispose of all those hard-won workers’ rights on the bonfire of a harsh Tory Brexit?

Andrea Leadsom: I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman is entirely wrong. The UK has gone beyond EU minimum standards in so many instances, including maternity entitlements, leave and pay for the other parent, shared parental leave, minimum holiday rights and the national minimum wage. One of the EU’s own agencies, EuroCloud, ranks the UK as the second best country in the EU for workplace wellbeing, and that is something of which the Government are extremely proud.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): In the United States, employment contracts are at will. There is no right to union representation, there is two-week holiday pay entitlement, there are no maternity rights, and there is no entitlement to sick pay. Think of that. Is it not the case that the purpose of not making alignment with the European Union legally binding is to align more closely with the United States?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady will know that what she has just said is absolutely not the case. The EU minimum standard is 20 days’ paid holiday; the UK’s is 28. There is no minimum wage in the EU; in the UK, we are moving to £10.50. Moreover, we are introducing a right of transparency from day one for all employees in respect of their employment entitlements. The UK already far exceeds the EU’s minimum standards, and there is no way that, in a free trade deal, the United Kingdom will need to—or agree to—give away anything that we think is in the interests of the UK’s workers. This Government are committed to making the UK the best place in the world in which to work.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): European standards are one thing, but another aspect of European Union law is that, once member states have established enhancements, they cannot row back from those enhancements. Why did the Government seek exemptions from compulsory arbitration if they were not intending to dilute those very enhanced standards to seek a trade deal with the United States?

Andrea Leadsom: I am tempted simply to refer the hon. Gentleman to what I have just said to his hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle upon Tyne Central (Chi Onwurah). The United Kingdom far exceeds EU standards for workers’ rights. We intend to enhance those further, but it is for trade unions in the United Kingdom, for businesses in the United Kingdom and for this Parliament to decide on those enhancements once we have left the European Union.

Points of Order

1.36 pm

Mrs Maria Miller (Basingstoke) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. The House of Commons could well agree to an early general election today, with Parliament being dissolved on Monday, which is the day scheduled for the election of your successor. If a general election is called, many Members could be quite understandably detained in their constituencies on Monday. To preserve the dignity of this place and the importance of the election, Mr Speaker, may I call on you to consider continuing in your position for the next two working days to ensure that you leave this place in the way that you would want to?

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): I will respond to the right hon. Lady, but first I will take the point of order from the hon. Member for North Wiltshire.

James Gray: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I know that the whole House will want to mark—and, I almost said, to celebrate—your departure from this post after 10 highly distinguished years in your seat, but would it not be a shame if the transition to the new Speaker were marked by anything less than an entirely seemly procedure? If, for example, a new Speaker were to be elected on Monday 4 November, the House could be dissolved on Tuesday. Let us imagine that that new Speaker were then not to be elected when representatives of other parties stood against him or her in the constituency. In that event, a Speaker would be sitting in your Chair for just one day, which would be a great deal less than seemly. There are a number of other reasons—to do with pensions, for instance—for that not to be allowed. Is there therefore a strong argument, Mr Speaker, for you to be kindly asked to extend your stay in the Chair for another couple of days, until next Monday, and for a new Speaker to be elected when the new Parliament reassembles?

Several hon. Members

Mr Speaker: No, no, not yet. I am keeping the hon. Member for Lichfield waiting because someone else signalled before he did, but I thank the hon. Member for North Wiltshire (James Gray).

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I think that everyone is aware of my personal ambitions in this regard but, to be very serious, it is perfectly possible that Parliament will be prorogued on Thursday evening. However, it might be prorogued on Monday or Tuesday next week. If it were prorogued on Thursday evening, there would not be a speakership election next Monday. I understand that if there were to be a general election on 12 December, the requirement for a 25-day dissolution before that would mean that the House would be dissolved next Wednesday.

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I think that everyone is aware of my personal ambitions in this regard but, to be very serious, it is perfectly possible that Parliament will be prorogued on Thursday evening. However, it might be prorogued on Monday or Tuesday next week. If it were prorogued on Thursday evening, there would not be a speakership election next Monday. I understand that if there were to be a general election on 12 December, the requirement for a 25-day dissolution before that would mean that the House would be dissolved next Wednesday.
If I am honest, speaking as a candidate, I think it odd for the House to be focusing on a speakership election when we should be focusing on the concerns of the nation. So let me gently say, as a candidate, that it would be good to resolve this matter as soon as possible. I think that it would be daft to have a speakership election before the general election.

Michael Fabricant: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I would like to take a contrary view and I will tell you why if I may—you and I discussed this actually some months ago. I have stark memories of being a new Member of Parliament and, when we voted as new Members of Parliament, we just voted on party lines; we did not know the individuals involved. I believe it is right that Members of Parliament should have the choice of different candidates for Speaker whom we know. There is a possibility of a large churn at the next general election, with new Members of Parliament who actually will not have a clue about the individual candidates and will simply vote on party lines. I do not think that is right for Parliament.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (IGC): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I agree with the hon. Member for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) because, when I came in in 1992 as a new Member, the first thing I did was vote for a Speaker, without knowing any of the candidates in any detail whatsoever. But surely the best way to resolve this issue is not to have a general election in December.

Mr Speaker: We have now had points of order from the right hon. Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller) and the hon. Members for North Wiltshire (James Gray), for Rhondda (Chris Bryant), for Lichfield (Michael Fabricant) and for Ilford South (Mike Gapes). My response is as follows, and I hope it will be taken in the constructive spirit in which it is intended. This is first and foremost, in terms of opinion, and opinion guides and informs us in everything, not a matter for the Chair. It is in the first instance, I think, very properly a matter for the candidates for the Chair—I think that is a material factor if there is a consensus among them—and, if I may say so, for the usual channels. I have been apprised of this matter only within the last hour and I have had the briefest of exchanges with the Leader of the House about it. I think that there is merit in hearing the views of the candidates not in the Chamber, and the views of the usual channels.

I hope I can be forgiven, not least in response to the right hon. Member for Basingstoke, who made her point with great courtesy, for saying this. I made my announcement on 9 September and I meant it. I have not the slightest ambition to serve any longer than the close of business on Thursday. Having been a Member of this place for 22 years and Speaker for 10, I will do my duty and, if the House asks me to do as people have requested, of course I take that extremely seriously and as close to being an instruction as makes no difference, but I do not think that it should be resolved here and now.

I hope I have given an earnest account of my good intentions and let us see if we can resolve this matter in a courteous and constructive way within the coming hours and certainly within 24 hours. I hope that is helpful. May I thank Members for what they have said and for the way in which they have said it?

Yasmin Qureshi (Bolton South East) (Lab): Four more years, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I think there would be a Division on that, and I think the hon. Lady would be in isolation in the Division Lobby—“Four more years”, she said. [Interruption.] I am glad the House is in a good mood at this time of day.

BILLS PRESENTED

Northern Ireland Budget Bill
Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)
Secretary Julian Smith, supported by the Prime Minister, the Attorney General and Rishi Sunak, presented a Bill to authorise the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of Northern Ireland of certain sums for the service of the year ending 31 March 2020; to appropriate those sums for specified purposes; to authorise the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland to borrow on the credit of the appropriated sums; and to authorise the use for the public service of certain resources (including accruing resources) for that year.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time tomorrow, and to be printed (Bill 9) with explanatory notes (Bill 9-EN).

Early Parliamentary General Election
Presentation and First Reading (Standing Order No. 57)
The Prime Minister, supported by Secretary Dominic Raab, the Chancellor of the Exchequer, Michael Gove, Secretary Priti Patel, Oliver Dowden and Secretary Stephen Barclay, presented a Bill to make provision for a parliamentary general election to be held on 12 December 2019.

Bill read the First time; to be read a Second time today, and to be printed (Bill 10) with explanatory notes (Bill 10-EN).
Early Parliamentary General Election Bill  

(Business of the House)

Mr Speaker: I should inform the House that I have selected an amendment in the name of the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy). In a moment, I will ask the Leader of the House to move the business of the House motion. I simply want to emphasise to the House that the vote on Second Reading of the Bill must come no more than four hours after the start of proceedings on the business of the House motion. There is an amendment to it, as I have just said, which I have selected, and of course colleagues are free to debate the motion and the amendment. May I gently encourage and exhort the House not to exhaust itself in so doing, because the deadline for the vote on Second Reading is as I have described, and I can inform the House that several colleagues wish to speak on the substance of the Bill? Moreover—gentle hint—the business of the House motion is potentially subject to a closure motion after a reasonable period of debate. I hope that that is helpful to the House.

1.45 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): I beg to move,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Early Parliamentary General Election Bill:

**Timetable**

(1) (a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be taken at today’s sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Notices of amendments, new Clauses or new Schedules to be moved in Committee of the whole House may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.

(c) Proceedings on Second Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) four hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(d) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) six hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) As soon as the proceedings on the Motion for this Order have been concluded, the Order for the Second Reading of the Bill shall be read.

(3) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(4) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chairman shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(5) If, following proceedings in Committee of the whole House and any proceedings on Consideration of the Bill, a legislative grand committee withholds consent to the Bill or any Amendment made to the Bill, the House shall proceed to Reconsideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

(6) If, following Reconsideration of the Bill—

(a) a legislative grand committee withholds consent to any Clause or Schedule of the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill (but does not withhold consent to the whole Bill and, accordingly, the Bill is amended in accordance with Standing Order No. 83N(6)), and

(b) a Minister of the Crown indicates his or her intention to move a minor or technical amendment to the Bill, the House shall proceed to consequential Consideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

(7) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chairman or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply—

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(d) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded; and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (18)(a) of this Order.

(8) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chairman or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(9) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (7)(c) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chairman or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(10) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (7)(d) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chairman shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause or Schedule of the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

**Consideration of Lords Amendments**

(11) (a) Any Lords Amendments to the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(12) Paragraphs (2) to (11) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (11) of this Order.

**Subsequent stages**

(13) (a) Any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) 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; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(14) Paragraphs (2) to (9) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (13) of this Order.

**Reasons Committee**

(15) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.
Of course, the Government recognise that the selection of legislation for an election on 12 December provides for an efficient timetable for the administration of the poll, it needs to proceed quickly. We have therefore proposed in the business motion that the House can agree the date of a general election—nothing more, nothing less.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Once upon a time, the Leader of the House was a champion of this House, but since he became Leader of the House he seems to be trying to curtail debate on every Government Bill. I know that he has had a long-running, if polite, dispute with the Speaker, but will he explain to us paragraph (3)(b) and why he felt it was necessary to say “the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.”?

The Speaker is never in the Chair when we are in Committee. Why does the Leader of the House feel it necessary to say that this afternoon?

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady and I served on the Procedure Committee together, and she must be aware that this is completely standard whenever the Speaker leaves the Chair to go into Committee. It has been standard for decades, if not for centuries, and there is nothing unusual in it. If anyone thinks that this is in any way a dig at you, Mr Speaker, they simply do not understand the procedures of this House. I note that you are indicating that you are in assent with what I am saying. I am frankly surprised that the hon. Lady, who is a distinguished member of the Procedure Committee, is unaware of that basic procedure.

So it is just a December general election, nothing more and nothing less. There will be six weeks to discuss all the great political questions facing our country before the people are given the chance to give their verdict, but the debate today is not about those great issues; it is simply about setting 12 December as the date for a general election.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for the business motion. The House is surprised and alarmed at the state of the Government for moving a motion for a general election in this way. The Leader of the House said yesterday that the Bill would be published this morning. It was a great disservice to the House that it was not available yesterday. It is just one line. We are now debating a programme motion to introduce the Bill in one day.

Yesterday, the Government called a vote under the terms of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, but they did not have the necessary majority. They did not get the magic 434 votes to give them a two-thirds majority in the House, so they are now introducing another Bill.

Will the Government now repeal the Fixed-term Parliaments Act? This Bill will be pushed through in one day and will then come back from the Lords. The Leader of the House criticised the first and second European Union withdrawal agreement Bills, which similarly had few clauses, yet he and the Government
are now doing exactly the same. As you have stated, Mr Speaker, the whole process will take six hours, with the Second Reading vote coming four hours after the start of proceedings, and with one amendment having been tabled. I think that this is another way to crash out of the EU without a deal, because the Government have not met their target of 31 October. This programme motion is unacceptable. It has been deliberately designed to avoid scrutiny of the Government.

Speaking of programme motions, the withdrawal agreement Bill is in limbo, in purgatory or in the ether. When this House was asking for a proper programme motion on the Bill that would have enabled hon. Members to have a proper discussion and to discuss, debate and amend where necessary, the Government did not want to give us that time. They did not want to deal with leaving the EU in an orderly way for businesses, farmers, working people and the environment. The Leader of the House will know the hon. Member for Cheltenham (Alex Chalk) said yesterday:

“Surely the proportionate and sensible thing is to offer the House more time. If it does not vote for it, the Government will take their course, but surely they should at least try.”—[Official Report, 28 October 2019; Vol. 667, c. 138.]

The Leader of the House made it clear yesterday in his response to the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Sir David Lidington) that he had no intention of bringing the withdrawal agreement Bill back to the House. Why? Why can we not have a proper debate on the Bill, with a new programme motion and with amendments being tested in a vote? Then we could see where the House stood on this issue.

James Gray (North Wiltshire) (Con): Will the shadow Leader of the House cast her mind back to the Second Reading debate for the withdrawal agreement Bill? Perhaps she will recall that Labour ran out of speakers some one hour before the end of the debate. Why does she therefore need more time?

Valerie Vaz: If the hon. Gentleman had listened to what I was saying, he would know that we need more time so that we can amend the Bill to take everyone’s views into account. We did not have an opportunity to amend it or even to vote on it.

We tried to have discussions, but the Government were not listening. Yesterday, in response to the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), the Leader of the House said that

“the reason for not bringing forward an allocation of time motion is that the House has made its mind clear: it does not want to deal or engage seriously with the withdrawal agreement Bill.”—[Official Report, 28 October 2019; Vol. 667, c. 134.]

How did he know that? I think that that is highly patronising. We have been begging for extra time so that we could have the votes, so that the House’s views would be clear. The reason that the Bill needed further discussion, as he knows, is that there would be a border down the Irish Sea—that was the reason that the previous Prime Minister ruled this out—or that it would result in the break-up of the United Kingdom. The Leader of the House should do the right thing by the House and reintroduce the withdrawal agreement Bill with a new programme motion that could be agreed with the usual channels and that took into account all sides of the debate. That would help the country to move on.

1.55 pm

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for bringing forward this very interesting business motion this afternoon. Here we are, once again, considering another programme motion. I am pretty certain that the Government are full and sick of these cursed things. Who knows?—after the contribution from the shadow Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), we might be heading for meaningful programme motion No. 2. I was beginning to sense that Labour Members were about to oppose this motion, which could mean that the Bill would not progress. My message to everyone is that if they are intent on getting their Brexmas decorations out, perhaps they should just wait a moment until this has been concluded.

We could have had all this done and dusted by now. It could all have been settled in October, and the Commons could have been reassembling right now to get on with the business that our constituents find important, but the Prime Minister’s bluff and bluster have brought us here to a deadlocked Parliament, a broken Britain and the spectre of the Government’s hard Brexit still looming over us. However, there are now a few things that we know as we consider this programme motion. They will not get their no deal, which is good, and the Prime Minister will not be able to bring back his withdrawal agreement until the British people have had their say, but probably most importantly, he has failed to get the United Kingdom out of the European Union on Thursday. Remember, it was “do or die”, “no ifs, no buts” and “die in a ditch”. This was the very basis of his Tory leadership campaign and his solemn pledge to his party. The Kippers, the Faragists and the right-wing Tories must feel like total mugs today, because he has not delivered and he will soon be judged.

The date on the Bill is 12 December, and we all know that a poll in December is less than ideal. In some of the highland parts of my constituency, for example, it gets dark about 3.30 pm at that time of year. It is probably worse for some of my colleagues. However, it is worth that risk in order that we remove this Prime Minister. Calling an election by driving through a Bill in just one day is also less than ideal. We will have six hours to consider all these details, and using a programme motion to clamp down on any kind of amendment is absolutely objectionable. That is why we are supporting the amendment tabled by the hon. Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) today.

It has never been the practice of the Scottish National party to vote with the Tories in this House on programme motions, and we will not be supporting them on this today, but we will not be standing in the way of the Bill. We will not vote with the Tories on the programme motion, but we will back the general election that this country definitely needs to break the Brexit deadlock and make Scotland’s voice heard loud and clear.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman know where his partner, the leader of the Liberal Democrats, is, or engage seriously with the withdrawal agreement Bill. So he will soon be judged.

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Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): I thank the Leader of the House for bringing forward this very interesting business motion this afternoon. Here we are, once again, considering another programme motion. I am pretty certain that the Government are full and sick of these cursed things. Who knows?—after the contribution from the shadow Leader of the House, the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz), we might be heading for meaningful programme motion No. 2. I was beginning to sense that Labour Members were about to oppose this motion, which could mean that the Bill would not progress. My message to everyone is that if they are intent on getting their Brexmas decorations out, perhaps they should just wait a moment until this has been concluded.

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Pete Wishart: I say to the hon. Lady in all gentle candour that to categorise the Liberal Democrats as the Scottish National party’s partner could not be further from the truth. We are delighted that they have come along with us to try to promote and progress this agenda. Sometimes, the Liberal Democrats have their values and their uses, although not very often.

The challenge for the Government is to get the numbers for this programme motion, and it is really up to the rest of the parties to decide what they are going to do today. The message from the Scottish National party is that we want no part of this shambolic Brexit; we want the right to decide our own future in Scotland. We will do our bit. We will take on the Tories, and we will beat them in Scotland. It is up to the other parties to have the courage and self-belief that they can beat the Tories. We will be back in even greater numbers in this House following this election, and we will continue to progress our nation’s independence and demand that it is Scotland’s right to choose the future it wants, based on the decisions of the Scottish people.

1.59 pm

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move amendment (a), in paragraph (7) after subparagraph (b) insert—

“(ba) the Question on any amendment, new Clause or new Schedule selected by the Chair for separate decision”.

Amendments (a) is about ensuring that whatever happens today the House can know that it was fair play. Last night, the Leader of the House told this place that, while we could not see the Bill before today, we could see the programme motion. A whole one copy was made available in the Table Office after 10 pm, and it showed that what the Government were trying to do was, in simple terms, rig today’s debate by removing the part of the Standing Orders that allows the Chair of proceedings the right to select any amendment, new clause or new schedule for vote.

To do that late at night, without any consultation with the Opposition and in the hope that nobody would notice, is frankly—I hope the Leader of the House understands this concept—not cricket. It is to admit that, rather than win the case for this Bill as it stands, the Executive want no challenge to it at all, and that, whether one thinks it is a good Bill or not, should be worry for us all. If we let this lie now, it will become standard practice in future.

This is not the first time the Government have tried such a measure when backed into a corner. They also did it on 24 October last year with Northern Ireland legislation. Thankfully, the Government saw sense and agreed to restore it, which is what amendment (a) would do today. It does not amend the Bill itself and does not encourage any particular selection; it simply reinstates the concept of fair play in this House by restoring our Standing Orders as they would be for any other legislation. In doing so it repairs both our rulebook and, frankly, our reputation.

Letting this programme motion through without the full list of rules is like letting Lance Armstrong keep his medals or Maradona benefit from the hand of God or accepting Major Ingram as a winner of “Who Wants to Be a Millionaire?”—[Interruption] That reaction is the point in case. Let us not confirm the reputation that the public already think we have of backroom deals, cheats and liars. Whatever one thinks of this Bill, let it be won by fair play today, let us use the rulebook that has always been used, and add amendment (a) to this programme motion.

Question put. That the amendment be made.

The House divided: Ayes 312, Noes 295.

Division No. 14] [2.3 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Heidi
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amesbury, Mike
Antoniassi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Bebb, Guto
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Oliver
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blackman-Woods, Dr Roberta
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgeon, 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
Charalachous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clarke, rh Mr Kenneth
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Coffey, Ann
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
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
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tammanjeet Singh
Dodds, Anneliese
Dodds, Jane
Doughly, Stephen
Dowd, Peter
Drew, Dr David
Dromey, Jack
Duffield, Rosie
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Edwards, Jonathan
Efford, Clive
Elliott, Julie
Ellman, Dame Louise
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris (Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami)
Farrell, Paul
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Forbes, Lisa
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gapes, Mike
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greening, rh Justine
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Grieve, rh Mr Dominic
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John

NOES

[356]
Early Parliamentary General Election 29 OCTOBER 2019 Early Parliamentary General Election
Bill (Business of the House) Bill (Business of the House)

Gwynne, Andrew
Gyimah, Mr Sam
Haigh, Louise
Hamilton, Fabian
Hammond, rh Mr Philip
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harman, rh Ms Harriet
Harris, Carolyn
Hayes, Helen
Hayman, Sue
Healey, rh John
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Hendry, Drew
Hepburn, Mr Stephen
Hermon, Lady
Hill, Mike
Hiller, Meg
Hobhouse, Wera
Hodge, rh Dame Margaret
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hollern, Kate
Hopkins, Kelvin
Hosie, Stewart
Howard, rh Sir George
Hug, Dr Rupa
Hussain, Imran
Jardine, Christine
Jarvis, Dan
Johnson, Diana
Jones, Darren
Jones, Gerald
Jones, Graham P.
Jones, Helen
Jones, rh Mr Kevan
Jones, Ruth
Jones, Sarah
Jones, Susan Elan
Kane, Mike
Keely, 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
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
Malhotra, Seema
Marsden, Gordon
Martin, Sandy
Maskell, Rachael
Matheson, Christian
Mc Nally, John
McCabe, Steve
McCarthy, Kerry
McDonagh, Siobhain
McDonald, Andy
McDonald, Steward Malcolm
McDonnell, rh John
McFadden, rh Mr Pat
McGinn, Conor
McGovern, Alison
McInnes, Liz
McKinnell, Catherine
McMahon, Jim
McMorrin, Anna
Mears, Ian
Miliband, rh Edward
Monaghan, Carol
Moon, Mrs Madeleine
Morgan, Layla
Morden, Jessica
Morgan, Stephen
Morris, Graham
Murray, Ian
Nandy, Lisa
Newlands, Gavin
Norris, Alex
O’Hara, Brendan
Onn, Melanie
Onurah, Chi
Osamor, Kate
Owen, Albert
Peacock, Stephanie
Pease, Teressa
Pennycook, Matthew
Phillips, Jess
Phillipson, Bridget
Pidcock, Laura
Platt, Jo
Pollard, Luke
Pound, Stephen
Powell, Lucy
Qureshi, Yasmine
Rashid, Faisal
Rayner, Angela
Reed, Mr Steve
Rees, Christina
Reeves, Ellie (Proxy vote cast by Bambos Charalambos)
Reeves, Rachel
Reynolds, Emma (Proxy vote cast by Pat McFadden)
Reynolds, Jonathan
Rimmer, Ms Marie
Robinson, rh Geoffrey
Rodda, Matt
Rowley, Danielle
Ruanne, Chris
Russell-Moyle, Lloyd
Ryan, rh Joan
Sandbach, Antoinette
Saville Roberts, rh Liz
Shah, Naz
Sharma, Mr Virendra
Sheerman, Mr Barry
Sheppard, Tommy
Sherriff, Paula
Shuker, Mr Gavin
Sidiqu, Tulp
Skipton, Mr Dennis
Slaughter, Andy
Smeeth, Ruth
Smith, Angela
Smith, Cat
Smith, Eleanor
Smith, Jeff
Smith, Laura
Smith, Nick
Smith, Owen
Smyth, Karin
Snell, Gethin
Sobel, Alex
Souby, rh Anna
Spellar, rh John
Starmar, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, rh Mark
Thelwiss, Alison
Thomas, Graham
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Austin, Ian
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi (Proxy vote cast by Leo Docherty)
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, rh Jake
Blackman, Bob
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Brady, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suelia (Proxy vote cast by Steve Baker)
Breereton, Jack
Bridgey, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, rh Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, rh Conor
Cairns, rh Alun
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Choi, Mr, Ray
Chishty, Rehan

Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Turner, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz
Umunna, Chuka
Vaz, rh 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, rh Sarah
Woodcock, John
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

Tellers for the Ayes:
Thangam Debbonaire and Chris Elmore

NOES

Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, rh James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, rh Dr Trèrèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, rh Oliver
Dovey-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr lain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, rh Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evennett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Early Parliamentary General Election Bill (Business of the House)

29 OCTOBER 2019

Question accordingly agreed to.

Main Question, as amended, put and agreed to. Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Early Parliamentary General Election Bill:

**Timetable**

(a) Proceedings on Second Reading and in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be taken at today's sitting in accordance with this Order.

(b) Notices of amendments, new Clauses or new Schedules to be moved in Committee of the whole House may be accepted by the Clerks at the Table before the Bill has been read a second time.

(c) Proceedings on Second Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) six hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(d) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) four hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

**Tellers for the Noes:**

Stuart Andrew and Iain Stewart

Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Freer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Ganier, Mark
Ghani, Ms Nasrat
Gibb, rh Nick
Gillian, rh Dame Cheryl
Glen, John
Goldsmith, rh 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
Hallford, rh Robert
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
Hoey, Kate
Hollingbery, Sir George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Hollonbone, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunt, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Jack, rh Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Saaj
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkyns, Andrea
Jenrick, rh Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, rh Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, rh Joseph
Jones, Andrew
Jones, rh Dr David
Jones, Mr Marcus
Kawczynski, Daniel
Keegans, Gillian
Kennedy, Seema
Kerr, Stephen
Knight, rh Sir Greg

Knight, Julian
Kwarteng, rh Kwasi
Lamont, John
Lancaster, rh Mark
Latham, Mrs Pauline
Leadsom, rh Andrea
Lefroy, Jeremy
Leigh, rh Sir Edward
Lewer, Andrew
Lewis, rh Brandon
Lewis, Mr Ivan
Lewis, rh Dr Julian
Liddell-Grainger, Mr Ian
Lidding, rh Sir David
Lopez, Julia (Proxy vote cast by Lee Rowley)

Lopresti, Jack
Lord, Mr Jonathan
Loughton, Tim
Macmillan, Craig
Maclean, Rachel
Main, Mrs Anne
Mak, Alan
Maitland, Kt
Mann, Scott
Masters, 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
Morgan, rh Nicky
Morris, Anne Marie
Morris, David
Morris, James
Morton, Wendy
Mundell, rh David
Murray, Mrs Sheryl
Murnion, rh Dr Andrew
Neill, Robert
Newton, Sarah
Nokes, rh Caroline
Norman, Jesse
O'Brien, Neil
Oftord, Dr Matthew
Opperman, Guy
Parris, Neil
Patel, rh Priti
Paterson, rh Mr Owen
Pawsey, Mark
Penning, rh Sir Mike
Penrose, John
Percy, Andrew
Perry, rh Claire
Philp, Chris
Pincher, rh Christopher
Poultier, Dr Dan
Pow, Rebecca
Prens, Victoria
Prisk, Mr Mark
Pritchard, Mark

Pursglove, Tom
Quin, Jeremy
Quince, Will
Raab, rh Dominic
Redwood, rh John
Rees-Mogg, rh Mr Jacob
Robertson, rh Mr Laurence
Robinson, Mary
Rosindell, Andrew
Ross, Douglas
Rowley, Lee
Rutley, David
Scully, Paul
Seely, Mr Bob
Selous, Andrew
Shapps, rh Grant
Sharma, rh Alok
Shelbrooke, rh Alec
Skidmore, rh Chris
Smith, Chloe
Smith, Henry
Smith, rh Julian
Smith, Royston
Soames, rh Sir Nicholas
Speelman, rh Dame Caroline
Spencer, rh Mark
Stephenson, Andrew
Stevenson, John
Stewart, Bob
Streeter, Sir Gary
Stride, rh Mel
Stuart, Graham
Sturdy, Julian
Sunak, rh Rishi
Swayne, rh Sir Desmond
Swire, rh Sir Hugo

Syms, rh Sir Robert
Thomas, Derek
Thomson, Ross
Throup, Maggie
Tohur, Kelly
Tomlinson, Justin
Tomlinson, Michael
Tracey, Craig
Tredinnick, David
Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
Truss, rh Elizabeth
Tugendhat, Tom
Vaizey, rh Mr Edward
Vara, Mr Shaishe
Vickers, Martin
Villiers, rh Theresa
Walker, Sir 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
Williams, rh Gavin
Wood, Mike
Wrang, Mr William
Wright, rh Jeremy
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(4) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chairman shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(5) If, following proceedings in Committee of the whole House and any proceedings on Consideration of the Bill, a legislative grand committee withholds consent to the Bill or any Clause or Schedule of the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill, the House shall proceed to Reconsideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

(6) If, following Reconsideration of the Bill—

(a) a legislative grand committee withholds consent to any Clause or Schedule of the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill (but does not withhold consent to the whole Bill and, accordingly, the Bill is amended in accordance with Standing Order No. 83N(6)), and

(b) a Minister of the Crown indicates his or her intention to move a minor or technical amendment to the Bill, the House shall proceed to consequential Consideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

(7) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chairman or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply—

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(ba) the Question on any amendment, new Clause or new Schedule selected by the Chair for separate decision;

(c) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(d) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded; and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (18)(a) of this Order.

(8) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chairman or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(9) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (7)(c) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chairman or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(10) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (7)(d) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chairman shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause or Schedule of the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out.

Consideration of Lords Amendments

(11) (a) Any Lords Amendments to the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(12) Paragraphs (2) to (11) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (11) of this Order.

Subsequent stages

(13) (a) Any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) 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; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(14) Paragraphs (2) to (9) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (13) of this Order.

Reasons Committee

(15) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.

Miscellaneous

(16) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply so far as necessary for the purposes of this Order.

(17) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(18) (a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly. (d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(19) (a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(20) No debate shall be held in accordance with Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) at today’s sitting after this Order has been agreed.

(21) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(22) No private business may be considered at today’s sitting after this Order has been agreed.
Early Parliamentary General Election Bill
Second Reading

Mr Speaker: Before I invite the Prime Minister to move the Second Reading, I must announce my decision on certification for the purposes of Standing Order No. 83J (Certification of bills etc. as relating exclusively to England or England and Wales and being within devolved legislative competence), with which I feel sure colleagues will be closely familiar. On the basis of material put before me, I certify that in my opinion the Bill does not meet the criteria required for certification under that Standing Order.

I will make a public service announcement now. Under the terms of the business of the House motion, as amended, which the House has just passed, amendments for the Committee stage of the Bill may now be accepted by the Clerks at the Table only. Members may continue to table amendments up until the start of proceedings in the Committee of the whole House. For the benefit of everyone, however, I would encourage Members to table their amendments as soon as possible. The Chairman of Ways and Means will take a provisional decision on selection and grouping on the basis of amendments tabled a quarter of an hour after the beginning of the Second Reading debate. That provisional selection list will be made available in the Vote Office and on the parliamentary website before the start of proceedings in Committee. If necessary, an updated amendment paper will be made available as soon as possible during proceedings in Committee. The Clerk at the Table is happy, and therefore we can all be happy.

2.23 pm
The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

It is now a week since Parliament voted to delay Brexit yet again. It is a week since this Parliament voted yet again to force Brussels to keep this country in the European Union for at least another three months, at a cost of £1 billion a month. In the days since then, the Government have tried to be reasonable and to ascribe the best possible motives to our friends and colleagues around the House. [Interjection.] I have twice offered more time for debate. I offered more time last week and I made the same offer last night. I said that we were prepared to debate this Bill—[Interjection.] I said we were prepared to debate the withdrawal Bill around the clock to allow Parliament time to scrutinise it, to the point of intellectual exhaustion. We must bear in mind that not only has this House been considering this issue for three and a half years, but last week when this Bill was being debated there was not a single new idea and not a single new suggestion. All they wanted was more time, more weeks, more months, when they could not even provide the speakers to fill the time allotted.

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab) rose—

The Prime Minister: I give way to the hon. Lady.

Jess Phillips: I thank the Prime Minister for eventually giving way—[Interjection.] We can all go, “Ooh”, like children but we are actually trying to get something through. Let me go back to the comments he made when he opened his speech. Either this House voted for the Second Reading or it delayed it—he cannot have it both ways, which is what he seems to want. Would the Prime Minister like to go back over his first comments and address whether he thinks they were entirely correct, because almost everything he said seemed to me as though he might be misleading the House and the country?

The Prime Minister: I am astonished to hear that the hon. Lady thinks that she voted for the programme motion last week—that is the logic of what she said. As far as I understand it, she voted for delay. She voted to delay Brexit indefinitely. Let us be absolutely clear: the whole country can see what is really going on. Does she want to deliver Brexit? No, she doesn’t. She does not want to deliver Brexit. People can see that Opposition Members do not want to deliver Brexit. All they want to do is procrastinate. They do not want to deliver Brexit on 31 October, 31 November or even on 31 January.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Will the Prime Minister confirm that the only indicative vote that passed through this Parliament was to find alternative arrangements to the backstop and that he removed the backstop from the deal, but this remain Parliament will still not vote for it? Therefore, his call for an election is the right thing to do—let the public decide.

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend is entirely right and he speaks for his constituency; they want to deliver Brexit, he wants to deliver Brexit, but Opposition Members just want to spin it out forever, until the 12th of never. When the 12th of never eventually comes around, they will devise one of their complicated parliamentary procedures and move a motion for a further delay and a further extension. I have to say that this delay is becoming seriously damaging to the national interest, because families cannot plan and businesses cannot plan. Not only is the climate of uncertainty corroding trust in politics, but it is beginning to hold everybody back from making vital everyday decisions that are important for the health of our economy—decisions on buying new homes, hiring new staff and making new investments. The performance of the UK economy is, frankly, miraculous, given the stasis here in Parliament.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Ind) rose—

The Prime Minister: That is why I hope that so many of our colleagues will support this Bill today, including the Father of the House, for whom I have the highest respect.

Mr Clarke: My right hon. Friend was one of those who delayed Brexit in March by voting against departure then on the deal that had then been negotiated. He did get a majority of 30 for his deal in principle last week, and if the subsequent time of this House had been devoted to the Committee and Report stage of the House, following the ordinary principles of government, we would be well on our way to leaving in the middle of November. I respectfully say to my right hon. Friend: can he find a slightly better basis for fighting this election when we get to the campaign in due course?

The Prime Minister: I am afraid that my right hon. and learned Friend is in error; I voted for the withdrawal Bill. I hope that he will vote for this Bill today to get Brexit done.
Mr Clarke indicated assent.

The Prime Minister: I take his nod as assent to that proposition, because that is the way—

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): Will the Prime Minister look at the amendment tabled in my name, which suggests that if we work seven days a week—like many of my constituents do—we could get the Brexit Bill through and meet his deadline? Is not a Brexit in the hand better than two Brexits in the bush?

The Prime Minister: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, who I know wants to deliver Brexit. I am afraid that the idea he puts forward is one that we have tried twice. We tried it last week and we tried it last night. It would have been a good offer for the right hon. Member for Islington North (Jeremy Corbyn) to take up. He refused to take it up, and we are left with no choice but to go to the country to break free from this impasse, and to allow us all to submit, as we must in all humility, to the judgment of the electorate—to allow us to make our case and, above all, to allow a new and revitalised Parliament, with a new mandate to deliver on the will of the people and get Brexit done.

That new Parliament, in just a few weeks’ time, will have before it a great new deal with the EU—a great new deal, which brings together Members from across the House, as the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) mentioned earlier. It will be the job of that new Parliament, in just a few weeks’ time, to ratify the withdrawal deal and put an end to this long period of parliamentary dither and delay.

I am glad to say that since I first put forward the idea of a general election as a way out of this impasse, the ice floes have begun to crack. The Lib Dems are now in favour; and the Scots Nats—the Scottish National party—is now in favour of it. There is only one blockage still standing in the way of democracy. There is only one party that refuses to trust the judgment of the people. There is only one party that is still running scared of an election and that is the main party of opposition, which is failing in its defining function—[Interruption.] Well, we have not heard anything to the contrary. Dogs bark, cows moo and Oppositions are meant to campaign for elections—except for this one.

I have no way of knowing what the right hon. Member for Islington North is going to say. He has called for an election 35 times in the last year alone. I have no idea why he has been so opposed to an election. Maybe he is because he has been following the precepts of his intellectual mentor, Fidel Castro, whose adoring crowds used to serenade him with the cry, “Revoluciones sí, elecciones no!” Maybe he is congenitally opposed. Maybe he has been listening to the shadow Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Hayes and Harlington (John McDonnell), or the right hon. and learned Member for Holborn and St Pancras (Keir Starmer), who I gather have been arguing against an election. He should beware of their motives in counselling him against a general election. It is not so much that they fear a general election, though they probably do; it is just that they do not want a general election with him as their leader.

I do not know what has been holding the right hon. Gentleman back from this obvious democratic exercise, but whatever it is, I hope that he will now stand up and say that he has mastered his doubts and that he is finally willing to submit to the electorate. He has mentioned that he is a great eater of porridge. All I can say is that when it comes to the offer of elections, he reminds me of Goldilocks in his fastidiousness—one offer is too hot and one is too cold. I hope he will be able to stand up this afternoon and say, “This time, this offer of an election is just right.”

If the right hon. Gentleman does that and I hope he does, we will then be able to put that choice to the people of this country. We can go his way, which is for an economic recipe that would mean the destruction of the UK’s wealth-creating system and over-taxation of a kind that is derived from revolutionary Venezuela, combined with the political nightmare agenda of not one, but two, referendums—one on the EU and one in Scotland—with all their potential for further rancour and recrimination. As I understand it, that is his policy. Or we can go forward with this Government: a Government who have secured a great deal that allows us to leave the EU as one whole United Kingdom—as England, Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland—able together to do free trade deals around the world, able to set our own laws, to take back control of our borders, our money and our regulations, able to deliver all the benefits and all the freedoms of Brexit, from new free ports to more humane treatment of animals, which the right hon. Gentleman would block, from tax breaks for new technology to cutting VAT on sanitary products.

It is a deal that the Opposition said was impossible three months ago. They said we could not change the withdrawal agreement. They said that we would never get rid of the backstop, and we did. The deal is there. It is ready to be approved by a new Parliament, with a Government yearning with every fibre of their being to be able to get on and deliver our one-nation Conservative agenda, with a vision for uniting this country and levelling up with record investments in health, like nothing else in a generation, with 20,000 more police officers and more funding for every primary and secondary school in the country—levelling up across this whole United Kingdom. It will be a Government able to commit to fantastic public services and to deliver, precisely because we believe in free markets and enterprise. We believe in free markets and enterprise and the wealth-creating sector of the economy in a way that causes a shadow of Transylvanian horror to pass over the semi-communist faces of the Opposition Front Bench.

That is the argument I want to have with the Leader of the Opposition. That is the biggest and most important difference between us—between us one-nation Conservatives and the socialists on the Opposition Benches. There is only one way now to move this country forward and to have that debate, and that is to get Brexit done. There is only one way to get Brexit done, in the face of this unrelenting parliamentary obstructionism—this endless, wilful, fingers crossed, “Not me, guv!” refusal to deliver on the mandate of the people—and that is to refresh this Parliament and to give the people a choice.

I say to the whole House and to all those who may still be hesitating about whether to vote for the Bill that there is only one way to restore the esteem in which our democracy is held and to recover the respect in which Parliament should be held by the people of this country, and that is, finally, to offer ourselves to the judgment of the people of this country. I commend the Bill to the House.
Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Labour backs a general election because we want this country to be rid of this reckless and destructive Conservative Government. They are a Government who have caused more of our children to live in poverty, more pensioners to be in poverty and more people to be in work and in poverty, more families to be without a home and more people to sleep rough on our streets. They are a Government who have cut and sold off so much of our important public services.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Jeremy Corbyn: No, I will not. They are a Government who created the vicious hostile environment that saw our own citizens deported. It is time for real change.

I have said consistently, when no deal is off the table we will back an election. Today, after much denial and bluster by the Prime Minister, no deal is officially off the table, so this country can vote for the Government it deserves.

Paul Farrelly (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): I shall be voting against an early election today and encourage as many of my colleagues as possible to defy the threats and blandishments, and to do so as well. The uncertainty about the outcome of a general election means that, in reality, no deal has certainly not been taken off the table.

Jeremy Corbyn: I hope my friends will join in the campaign to defeat this Government and to bring in a Government who will end injustice, poverty and inequality in this country. That is why I joined the Labour party all those years ago, and I will be very proud to take that as our message to the people of this country. I want to give our public services the funding they need and to end the threat of privatisation that hangs over so many public service workers; to stop the grotesque poverty and inequality in our country; to rebuild the economy in every region and every nation of this country; to tackle the climate emergency with a green new deal, a green industrial revolution that will bring good quality jobs to many areas of the country that have been denied them by this Government and their Liberal Democrat accomplices during the coalition years; and, after three years of Conservative failure, to get Brexit sorted—the only party that is doing so—by giving people the final say on what happens over Brexit.

We will launch the most ambitious radical campaign for real change in this country, and I look forward to campaigning in a general election all over the country, including in Uxbridge if the Prime Minister is still the Conservative candidate there at that time.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): I am extremely grateful to the Leader of the Opposition for giving way. May I say to him that, in the upcoming election, the right of the Scottish people to choose their own future will be at the front and centre? If the Scottish National party wins a majority of seats in Scotland, will he respect that result?

Jeremy Corbyn: I am looking forward to campaigning all over Scotland to support Labour candidates to be elected in Scotland. Indeed, I was there last weekend, and the enthusiasm of Scottish Labour to get out there and campaign was palpable everywhere. I am delighted to support Scottish Labour in its campaign to bring £70 billion of public investment to Scotland under a Labour Government, which is something that the SNP cannot offer.

Danielle Rowley (Midlothian) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for giving way. I look forward to campaigning with him in Scotland in the upcoming election, but, as he will know, one crucial thing in this election will be the turnout and ensuring that we get as many people out and using their votes as possible. In Scotland especially, it is very dark and very cold. Does he support the idea of having polling day as a public holiday to ensure maximum turnout?

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my friend for that intervention and compliment her on her work. I agree that a public holiday on election day would be a very good idea, because it does mean that everyone could then get along to vote without the problems of being at work at that time. It is something that has been discussed before. I do not know all the amendments that are coming up later on this afternoon, Mr Speaker, but if one were included that would be very welcome indeed.

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): My right hon. Friend and I raised this yesterday—that I have tabled a cross-party amendment, which is supported by many Labour colleagues, for votes at 16. The Prime Minister talks a lot about the United Kingdom. In Wales and in Scotland, 16-year-olds now have the right to vote in elections and in referendums. Does my right hon. Friend agree that that should be afforded to all 16-year-olds in the United Kingdom?

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my friend for that intervention. I am coming on to that in a moment, but I absolutely do agree that all 16-year-olds should have the right to vote, because it seems fundamental to our democracy. After all, it is young people’s future that we will be debating in this election. I thank him for his intervention, and the work that he has done on bringing about parliamentary scrutiny to this whole process.

The House has amended the programme motion and it has done so in a very helpful way that empowers this Chamber, the House of Commons, to amend this legislation. I think we should just reflect for a moment that the Prime Minister was actually trying to stifle parliamentary democracy with an almost unprecedented edict that only the Government could amend their own legislation, which presumably they wrote last night. This idea of their amending today what they wrote last night is simply that they have a problem, perhaps, with memory loss—I do not know what it is. I am pleased that those amendments will be debated today.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Jeremy Corbyn: No, I will not give way.

What this legislation does is sum up in a couple of words the undemocratic and authoritarian instincts of this Government and this Prime Minister in relation to Parliament. I want to put on record my thanks to my

2.37 pm

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friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) for her persistence in tabling that amendment last night, which means that the House will have an opportunity to debate a number of very serious amendments today. We will be seeking to expand the franchise in the December election, which means supporting votes at 16, as is the case now for Scottish Parliament and Welsh Assembly elections. It also means that we support the rights of EU citizens with settled status to vote in elections in this country. After all, we do recognise their contribution to our society. We do give them votes in local elections, so it seems to me only logical that, since they have made their future in this country in our society, they should have a right to vote on their future as well, and I look forward to supporting those amendments later on today.

**Lloyd Russell-Moyle** (Brighton, Kemptown) (Lab/Co-op): I look forward to getting out on the campaign trail and smashing the Conservatives at the ballot box and returning more Labour colleagues here. I am particularly pleased by what my right hon. Friend has just said around EU settled status here. We already allow our Commonwealth citizens to vote in our elections, so can we try to ensure that all EU citizens who are settled here get to vote as well?

**Jeremy Corbyn**: My friend is right. Commonwealth citizens have permanently had the right to vote in British elections, and that is absolutely right, and, as far as I know, most Commonwealth countries reciprocate. Our relationship with Ireland means that all Irish nationals have an automatic right to vote in UK elections and vice versa.

**Sir Hugo Swire** (East Devon) (Con) rose—

**Vicky Ford** (Chelmsford) (Con) rose—

**Luciana Berger** (Liverpool, Wavertree) (LD) rose—

**Jeremy Corbyn**: No, I will not give way.

It seems to me—

**Sir Hugo Swire**: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Jeremy Corbyn**: No, I will not give way.

It seems to me—

**Sir Hugo Swire** rose—

**Jeremy Corbyn**: No, I will not give way.

**Sir Hugo Swire**

**Jeremy Corbyn**: On that point—

**Jeremy Corbyn**: I have already said I will not give way, but I will say it again—no!

**Sir Hugo Swire** rose—

**Mr Speaker**: Order. The right hon. Gentleman should resume his seat. He has been in the House since 2001 so he is familiar with parliamentary etiquette, which stipulates quite clearly that when somebody who has the Floor is not giving way, he should accept the verdict. He does not have a right to intervene and he should have learned that by now.

**Jeremy Corbyn**: Thank you, Mr Speaker.

I want to make the point that we want any election to involve as many people as possible. It is meant to be a big exercise in democracy, and I hope the amendments—

**Sir Hugo Swire**: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Jeremy Corbyn**: I have already said that I will not give way, so I say it again for the fourth time—no!

In that election, everyone should have the right to participate. It is their future and this country’s future that is at stake.

The Prime Minister has failed in his promise to be out of the European Union, do or die, on 31 October, but it may be the date that Parliament dissolves, thereby marking the end of his tenure in office. Whatever date the House decides for the election, I am ready for it, we are ready for it. We want to be able to say to the people of this country that there is an alternative to austerity, there is an alternative to inequality, there is an alternative to sweetheart trade deals with Donald Trump, and there is an alternative of a Government who invest in all parts of the country, a Government who are determined to end injustice in our society, and a Government who are determined to give our young people a sense of hope in their society, rather than the prospects of indebtedness and insecure employment in the future, which, sadly, is all a Conservative Government and their coalition with the Lib Dems have ever brought them. I am very ready to go out there and give that message in any election whenever it comes.

2.48 pm

**Sir William Cash** (Stone) (Con): I very much applaud the Prime Minister for the stand that he has taken continuously over the past months. He is doing the right thing for the right reason. Furthermore, I have listened to the Leader of the Opposition talking about autocratic, undemocratic decision making. Time and again, we have witnessed undemocratic decisions—on the Benn Act and a series of other enactments and motions—continuously over the same period of months.

The Opposition are a disgrace. They have completely undermined the democracy in this House, and have undermined the referendum—or are trying to do so. At last, they have been dragged kicking and screaming to the Dispatch Box, and it sounds as if today they are effectively going to agree that we will have a general election in December. I therefore have absolutely no compunction whatever in condemning them for their shameless behaviour and for voting against motions for an early general election over the last few months.

I am glad to say that I voted against the Fixed-term Parliaments Bill back in 2010 and 2011 during its passage through the House, and I did so for precisely the reasons that we are now having to overcome. I said at the time—one on Second Reading and while discussing various amendments—that the provisions of that Bill, which the Bill we are discussing today is at last putting forward, were “in defiance of the democratic mandate. This is about Whips and patronage: it has nothing to do with the people outside.”

I said that damage was being done to the people of this country and that there was no mandate “of any kind for any party, in any manifesto, in any part of the political system.”
I also said that
“a motion can be passed by a simple majority of one, as has been the case from time immemorial—from the very inception of our parliamentary process in what is sometimes described as the ‘mother of Parliaments’. That is now being changed in a manner that will seriously alter the method whereby a Government may fall.”—[Official Report, 24 November 2010; Vol. 519, c. 309-312.]

Furthermore, I added that what mattered was the constitutional principle that underpins the basis of having a simple majority in this House; this two-thirds majority has always been wrong.

**David Linden** (Glasgow East) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald**: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Sir William Cash**: I will not give way for a very simple reason, which is that both hon. Gentlemen have consistently tried to obstruct Brexit for the most spurious and completely unacceptable reasons.

**Mr Speaker**: Has the hon. Gentleman completed his oration?

**Sir William Cash** indicated assent.

**Mr Speaker**: He has. [ Interruption. ] There is a rather unseemly atmosphere in here. Mr Linden, you are a very over-excitabale fellow today; calm yourself. Mr Newlands next to you is clearly moderately embarrassed. He is going to try to encourage you to tread a path of virtue, and we should say three cheers to that. Meanwhile you can smile, Mr Linden, because I am about to call your leader—Mr Ian Blackford.

2.52 pm

**Ian Blackford** (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): It is a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash). I have to say that I think he has just written the SNP’s leaflets for our election campaign. He says that we have tried to obstruct Brexit. Well, I would say to the House: guilty as charged. Let me explain exactly why we have done so.

We are used to referendums in Scotland. We have had two: one in 2014 and another in 2016. Crucially, we were told in 2014 that, if Scotland stayed in the United Kingdom, we would be staying in Europe. But more than that—we were told that this was going to be a Union of equals and that Scotland was going to be respected. And what has happened? In the European referendum, Scotland voted to remain in Europe by 62%, and our Parliament and Government have sought to give voice to that. We have published document after document under the title “Scotland’s Place in Europe”, in which we have sought to compromise with the United Kingdom Government, but at every step of the way—whether it was the previous Prime Minister or this one—we have been ignored.

I have repeatedly made the point—I make no apology for making it again today—that SNP Members are simply not prepared to sit back and allow Scotland to be taken out of the European Union against its will. On that basis, I welcome the opportunity of an election. Make no mistake, the coming election will be for the right of Scotland to determine its own future. We will reflect on everything that has happened since 2017, when 13 Scottish Conservatives were temporarily elected to this House. I say “temporarily” because they have voted against Scotland’s interests every step of the way, and have given no consideration to the fact that every single local authority area in Scotland voted to remain.

Just think about what Brexit would do to Scotland. Just think about the challenge we face in growing our population—a challenge that we have had for decades, but one that we have risen to on the basis of the free movement of people. Our economy is growing and European citizens have made a contribution to that economy. We have collectively benefited from the right to live, work and travel in 28 EU member states. We voted to retain those rights, yet the Conservatives want to take us out, so I really look forward to the election, when we can reinforce the mandate that we already have from the Scottish election in 2016, when the people of Scotland yet again voted the SNP into power. We have a mandate for an independence referendum, and it ill behoves this House to frustrate the legitimate demands of our Parliament and our Government. If the people of Scotland back the SNP again in the coming election, it has to be the case that we have the right to determine our future.

I am grateful that the European Union has granted us an extension to the end of January, and we must use the time wisely. But I say to our friends in Europe: please remember to stand by Scotland in our hour of need; and, as our dear friend Alyn Smith said in the European Parliament, keep a light on for Scotland because we are coming back. And that is because we are ambitious for our country. We want to grow our economy, to continue to benefit from the single market and the customs union, to make Scotland a destination in Europe, and to complete the journey that Scotland embarked on with devolution 20 years ago. We have a Parliament that has delivered for the people of Scotland and that is pushing on with addressing the challenge of climate change. We have a Parliament that is doing its job and has delivered education free at the point of need, not based on people’s ability to pay. I could go on about the differences between the way in which the Scottish Government and the UK Government have delivered for our people, and about the growing self-confidence that we see in Scotland.

**Neil Gray** (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP): As my right hon. Friend spells out, it is going to be quite straightforward for the SNP to write its manifesto for the upcoming election. The Prime Minister has failed in his promise of “do or die”, and the Scottish Conservatives have been acting against the interests of the people of Scotland and the against the wishes in their referendum in 2016, so I wonder how easy it will be for them to be trusted in this election. Is it not true that in that election we cannot give the Scottish Conservatives or this Prime Minister any chance at all?

**Ian Blackford**: Absolutely, and that allows me to ask the question: where is the Prime Minister? He seems to have beetled and scuttled out of the Chamber. One wonders if he is away to dig a ditch.

One of the things I can be proud of is that we gave 16 and 17-year-olds the right to vote in the 2014 referendum in Scotland. Why? Because it was about their future; it was a principled decision that those who follow us, who
are going to be living and working in our country, have the right to a say in its future. The SNP calls on Members to reduce the voting age to 16 for all elections, and to extend the franchise to citizens of the European Union. As we have heard in this debate, citizens from the Commonwealth are given the right to vote in our election. Why is it the case that European nationals, who are our friends—who work with us and are part of our community, and whose rights are affected by what the Conservatives want to do—do not have the right to vote in our elections? It is an absolute disgrace. Those who pay taxes in our country should have rights of representation.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): Can the right hon. Gentleman tell me whether any other European countries offer European citizens not from their country the right to vote in their national elections?

Ian Blackford: If the hon. Lady had been listening, I just explained that we do that in Scotland. The problem for the Tories is that they can never make a judgment on what is the right thing to do. We are talking about EU citizens who are losing their rights.

Let me remind the House of what the Prime Minister said way back in July in response to my hon. Friend the Member for Glenrothes (Peter Grant) when he asked about EU nationals having the right to vote:

“No guarantees, as the hon. Gentleman knows, we are giving unilaterally, in a supererogatory way.”—[Official Report, 25 July 2019; Vol. 663, c. 1498.]

Well, there we are—the words of the Prime Minister, doing exactly what we are calling for, yet we find that the Conservatives are blind to these calls. I therefore expect the Government today to look positively on any amendments that come forward for EU nationals. The Government have nothing to fear from extending the franchise—and of course one very important and salient point is that EU nationals are already on the voters register because they are allowed to vote in local elections. There is no moral reason for the Government not to allow this.

This is about choosing our future: our future in Europe. It is about choosing freedom from austerity. It is about opportunity. We cannot be held back any more by Westminster. The SNP will take that message to the people. Many decades ago it was said in a letter by Steinbeck to Mrs Kennedy that Scotland is not a lost cause—Scotland is a cause unwon. We will win that battle. Scotland will become an independent country and the general election will be an important step on the way to completing that journey.

3.2 pm

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): When I first arrived in this House as a new MP nearly two and a half years ago, I knew that delivering Brexit would be a complex problem. I knew that achieving a negotiation between our country and our 27 nearest neighbours was going to be a huge challenge and cover many areas. I also knew that leaving the EU with a deal was in the best interests of so many of our constituents, especially those who have shared families with other residents from other EU countries, those who have jobs in companies that trade with Europe, those who are involved in our security services and want to share data with our closest allies, and those in our scientific community who often work on collaborative projects that make a difference to our world’s future and want to continue to work with those in our neighbouring countries easily.

The deal that the previous Prime Minister delivered was challenging. Some people thought that the backstop might last forever. I always saw it as a temporary issue, but I saw it as a way to deliver Brexit and move on. I voted for it three times. Our current Prime Minister has done what nobody thought he would achieve. He has reopened the negotiations and found a different way to resolve the incredibly complex situation in Northern Ireland; it is a solution that keeps open the border between Northern Ireland and Ireland. I voted for that deal too, and many colleagues from the Opposition Benches were brave enough to come through the Lobby with us to support it. I would have liked to see the programme motion carried. I believe that our constituents expect us to roll up our sleeves and work day and night to get that deal over the line. I would have liked to see a second programme motion, but I genuinely do not believe that the Opposition would have supported it.

Alberto Costa (South Leicestershire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that the best way in which our governing party can face the electorate is to say clearly to them that the best way of delivering Brexit is with the deal that the Prime Minister has agreed with the EU?

Vicky Ford: I absolutely agree, because the deal is in the interests of our country and has been negotiated with 27 other countries.

Continuing this uncertainty does not solve anything. A second referendum will not solve the uncertainty. The Labour policy to try to renegotiate and then have another referendum and then another one does not solve the problem.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Ind): The hon. Lady makes the case that a second referendum will not solve the Brexit impasse. I would like her to elaborate on that. On the question of the Bill which the Prime Minister proposed unamended and has now pulled, so this House cannot take it forward, surely a referendum on whether or not that proceeds would give a definitive outcome. Perhaps if the House had allowed the British public a vote on the previous Prime Minister’s deal, we could have had a definitive outcome many, many months ago.

Vicky Ford: The Prime Minister’s Brexit deal was pulled the moment the programme motion was rejected—sadly. If I believed that the Opposition truly wanted to have a couple of extra days to scrutinise it, I would give them another chance, but they proved otherwise again and again when they failed to turn up to scrutiny Committees and debates in this House.

Paul Farrelly: Does the hon. Lady recognise that for the majority of Members here who are concerned that we are leaving the EU, the main issue was not the backstop—it was a lack of clarity about the future relationship with our European neighbours and trading partners, and this second deal does not change that one iota?
Vicky Ford: The EU has made it clear since day one that we cannot discuss the detail on the future partnership until we have agreed the terms of withdrawal. That is in article 50—read it. It is only the tiniest paragraph, but it makes that clear.

The document on the future relationship covers a wide range of different issues. I have been impressed by how much the EU27 have been prepared to put into that document, including areas such as co-operation on science and security, access to trade and the deepest free trade agreement. It details important issues such as how financial services can work together in our regulatory environment, and why sharing data is so important. That is all in the future framework, but we cannot discuss the detail of it until we have agreed the terms of exit. Every time the Opposition parties say otherwise, they are being disingenuous with the British people.

Saying that we will go back and try to have another referendum in a constituency such as mine, which voted 51:49, will not heal the divisions. It just leads to a lack of decisions. In my constituency, people want to get on and focus on other things: the more police that they are seeing on the streets, the improvements that we are seeing in our nearby hospital, the money that is coming into our NHS, the money that our schools have been asking for and is now being delivered, the infrastructure improvements that have just given my constituency the largest housing infrastructure grant in the country and unlocked a railway station that has been blocked for 20 years, and the work that we are doing on the environment—incidentally, the Lib Dems could not be bothered to turn up to the debate on the Environment Bill last night. My constituents want us to be working on those issues that affect them and their future, and not going round and round in circles on how we resolve Brexit.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (LD): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I listened closely to the comments made by the hon. Member for Chelmsford (Vicky Ford). She alluded to the Lib Dems not being present last night. That is not the case. Our spokesperson for the environment—my hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Jane Dodds)—was here for the entirety of the debate, as I understand it from the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), so I would like that to be amended in the record.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady has amended the record. [Interruption.] No, no, no—I do not require any help from the hon. Member for Chelmsford. I am perfectly capable of adjudicating upon these matters on the strength of 10 and a quarter years in the Chair without her sedentary chuntering. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) has corrected the record as she sees it, and the hon. Member for Chelmsford appears to accept the veracity of what she said. I was not here for that debate, but I know that the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion orated in the debate, because I saw it on the annunciator. She could not have done so if she was not here. She did, so she was here.

Vicky Ford: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Oh, if you really feel it is necessary.

Vicky Ford: I apologise if one Liberal Democrat Member was here last night, but as I see it, the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion represents the Green party.

Mr Speaker: I am perfectly well aware of that. The hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree has corrected the record as far as her party is concerned. She referred to the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion, who was here and did speak. With the greatest of respect, there is nothing to add. A lot of other colleagues wish to speak in the debate, from whom we can now hear and in whose contributions I am sure everybody is interested.

3.11 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): The question that we are grappling with in this House and, indeed, in the wider country is not just a narrow matter of our relationship with the European Union, although this debate on Brexit has exposed significant differences in how people feel about that. People’s identities of remain or leave run deep, because this is not only about whether we remain in the EU or leave; it is about who we are as a country. It is about our values. It is about whether we are open, inclusive and internationalist in our outlook, facing the future, or whether we are closed and insular, wanting to pull up the drawbridge and look to the past. That is the key question that we, as a country, need to resolve.

The Prime Minister talked about “one whole United Kingdom”. I thought he had a cheek, because he has not been acting in a way that protects our whole United Kingdom. He has sold out the people of Northern Ireland with the deal he has done with the EU. This is a man who said that no Conservative Prime Minister should ever accept a border in the Irish Sea, yet that is exactly what he has done. My Liberal Democrat colleagues and I think that our United Kingdom is something precious that is worth protecting, and that Scotland, England, Wales and Northern Ireland are stronger together.

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): If there was a vote across the whole country—one person, one vote—one on the Prime Minister’s deal, my view is that the majority of people would vote remain. Does the hon. Lady agree that there is a great fear that, with a minority of votes, the Tories could get a majority of seats if the remain side splits, and we will end up with Brexit, thanks to her provocation?

Jo Swinson: The hon. Gentleman and I have both been campaigning for a people’s vote. I believe that the ideal way to resolve this issue is to put this specific Brexit deal to the public. He is right; I think that the public would be likely to reject this bad Brexit deal, because it is a bad deal. If we look at the polls, we have to go back some way to find the leave vote being ahead of remain, and that has been an increasingly consistent pattern in the last couple of years.

People who support Brexit struggle to agree among themselves what Brexit should look like—we see it day in, day out in this Chamber. To some people, the Prime Minister’s deal is not Brexity enough, and other people want to see a softer Brexit. The suggestion that there is a majority in the country for this specific Brexit path is wrong, which is why this needs to be put to the people for a final say. But I have campaigned for that. I have marched for that. We have argued for that. We have tabled amendments for that. We have not been able to secure it, and my fear is that we will not in this Parliament. We do not have the luxury of time, because the EU has...
given us an extension to 31 January. We need to resolve how we will use that time, because further extensions should not be guaranteed.

Dr Rosena Allin-Khan (Tooting) (Lab): The hon. Lady and I have both stood on a platform asking for a people’s vote. My constituency is the second youngest in the country. Does she agree that it is essential that 16-year-olds have the vote, to save their future?

Jo Swinson: The hon. Lady and I agree on much. I do want 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds to be able to vote. The time for that change is coming, and I will always vote to support 16-year-olds and 17-year-olds having the right to vote. I have debated this issue over many years with many MPs, and Members who are sceptical should look at the success of votes at 16 in Scotland. At 4 o’clock in the afternoon on polling day, we see young people from fifth year and sixth year leaving school, walking down the road and going en masse to the polling station. It is a sight to behold, and it is a positive step. Many Members—particularly Conservative Members—in Scotland who were sceptical have come round to the idea after seeing that it is a successful change. Of course I will support that.

Paul Farrelly: Has the hon. Lady considered the Liberal Democrats’ contribution to the present predicament? Their cannibalisation by the Conservatives in 2015—helped by their record in coalition, particularly on tuition fees—gave David Cameron the majority to get the referendum legislation through. Why on earth is she now making it worse by pushing for this early date? The uncertainty of the outcome of a general election certainly does not take no deal off the table.

Jo Swinson: While the Liberal Democrats were in coalition, there was not a referendum on our membership of the European Union. In fact, we passed a law to say that that should only happen when there was a significant treaty change. The loss of Liberal Democrats from the Government allowed that to be pushed through the House of Commons.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): The hon. Lady says that there was not a referendum under the coalition as a result of the Liberal Democrats. I was here in 2008, and she said in this Chamber, “We are being gagged. Only the Liberal Democrats will offer an in/out referendum.” The Liberal Democrats were actively campaigning for that. They were saying that the Conservatives were only offering a referendum on the Lisbon treaty, while they would give the public a say. Whatever happened in coalition, she has long been a campaigner for an in/out referendum.

Jo Swinson: We then voted to pass an Act of Parliament to say that that should happen at the point of significant treaty change, which we have not seen. I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. She has a beautiful constituency, which I am already very familiar with, and I expect to be there more in the coming weeks.

As I was saying, the Prime Minister has not supported the United Kingdom. He has agreed to a border down the Irish sea, bluntly, because he does not care sufficiently enough. This is all about him; it is not even about what he thinks is right for the country. There are different views on the European Union across this House. The hon. Member for Stone (Sir William Cash), who was in his place earlier, has had a very consistent view on membership of the European Union. I have taken a different view, but most people in this House know where they stand on our membership of the EU. They do not have to write two different newspaper articles to decide which way to come down on that matter, and they would not make such a decision on the basis of what is more likely to get them elected as leader of their party.

The fact that the Prime Minister was prepared to make that call in his own interest, rather than in the national interest, proves he is not fit to be Prime Minister. This is a man who has been prepared to say anything and sell out anyone to become Prime Minister. No wonder people do not trust him. He said that he would get a great deal. What has he brought forward? It is an atrocity. It is bad for our NHS. We have already lost 5,000 nurses from the European Union 27 countries. It is a bad deal for our security. It is a bad deal for our economy—so bad that the Government have not even published an economic impact assessment. So much for a party that liked to say it was one of economic competence. Now it has even given up doing the analysis because it knows the results would be so bad. It is a bad deal for workers’ rights and environmental protections, which have been removed from the treaty and put into a declaration that is not worth the paper it is written on.

The Prime Minister also said that we would leave on 31 October, which is Thursday—Halloween—and we are not leaving on 31 October. I for one will be celebrating the fact that we are still a member of the EU, as will the 3 million citizens in a country from other EU countries and so millions and millions more. It shows that the Prime Minister says one thing and is not bothered about whether he delivers it.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): On the question of trust, has not the hon. Lady said that her party’s policy is to have a second referendum, but if the referendum comes up with the wrong result, she will ignore it, while if that does not happen and her party gets into a majority Government, she will just dispense with article 50 and ignore 17.4 million people? Why should anybody trust what she says, and why should anybody believe that she has any truck in being called a Liberal Democrat any more?

Jo Swinson: I really have to scotch this suggestion. I am not going to change my basic belief, and, to be honest, I do not think there are many in this House who would do so. Had we voted to remain in 2016, I would not have expected the hon. Member for Stone suddenly to think that being a member of the European Union was a good idea. Of course, I will always think it a good idea to be a member of the European Union, but what would be the case—

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Jo Swinson: I have not finished answering the hon. Gentleman’s colleague.

If we had a people’s vote on the deal and there was a vote in favour, I would at least have confidence that there was a majority view in the country in favour of
leaving under those specific circumstances. Right now, I have no confidence about that whatsoever. The hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) mentioned that it is the policy of the Liberal Democrats to go into a general election and say to people, “We are a party of remain. We believe that our best future is in the European Union. If you vote Liberal Democrat, we will do everything we can to stop Brexit. If you elect a majority Liberal Democrat Government, we will revoke article 50. If we are in that situation, as Prime Minister, I will revoke article 50 on day one.” That is setting out what we plan to do and, if we are elected and win the election, then doing it, which is exactly the essence of democracy.

**Tim Loughton:** Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

**Jo Swinson:** I have answered the hon. Gentleman’s point. I am going to make some progress and let other people contribute to this debate.

As a country face huge challenges. We have a mental health crisis, particularly among young people, that needs to be tackled. We have schools that urgently need investment to make them world-class centres of learning. We need to take bold action to tackle the climate emergency, because the scientists tell us that time is running out. However, we have huge opportunities and huge reasons be hopeful. We have people with huge innovation and ingenuity in our universities and our businesses, and there is a spirit of entrepreneurialism in our country. We are in the middle of a technological revolution that can help provide answers to the climate emergency, to the shared problems that we face and to improve our health and wellbeing for the future. When I speak to young people—whether they are in schools in my constituency, the climate strikers or the people on the marches about remaining in the EU—I hear their energy and enthusiasm, which should be an inspiration to us all.

As members of the European Union, working with our closest neighbours as a United Kingdom family of nations—strong together, working within the EU—we can reshape our economy, harness the technological revolution and build a brighter future. That is the message the Liberal Democrats will be taking to the country in this general election.

3.25 pm

**Mr Bob Seely** (Isle of Wight) (Con): I think we have had a filibustering of democracy for much of the last year. We have had endless games and arcane procedures to prevent Brexit, and we are seeing the same games today to prevent a general election. I think this Parliament is really reaching new levels of absurdity. In the Leader of the Opposition, we have—perhaps for the first time in history—a man who can neither lead nor oppose. I still do not quite understand whether he is supporting an election today. We need an election or we need Brexit. The Labour party voted against the Brexit timetable motion, which means that we cannot proceed. Therefore, we have to go for plan B, which is an election.

**Mr Kevan Jones** (North Durham) (Lab): May I say to the hon. Gentleman that he is just wrong? On the morning of the vote on the first programme motion, the Labour side of the usual channels asked for a meeting, but it was refused by the Government. It is now up to the Government to lay down a new programme motion, but they have refused to do that. It is still within the powers of the Government to do it.

**Mr Seely:** I have absolutely no doubt, given the bad faith that has been exhibited over Brexit and this election, that if the Government came forward with a new timetable motion, the Labour party would find ways of picking it apart endlessly.

**Mr Jones:** No, it is worse than that. In the morning, the Labour Chief Whip asked through the usual channels whether he would be able to sit down to talk about a programme motion. It was the Government who refused to do that, and it is the Government who are refusing to bring back a programme motion. The idea that somehow this House is stopping debate on the withdrawal Bill is absolutely not true.

**Mr Seely:** Is the right hon. Gentleman saying that the Labour party did not oppose the programme motion, because the Labour party did oppose the programme motion? However—

**Mr Jones rose—**

**Mr Seely:** If I may, I would not mind making a bit of progress.

On the grounds of consensus, why do the hon. Gentleman’s Front Benchers not come and say that? They should come and ask to renegotiate a programme motion now.

**Mr Jones rose—**

**Mr Seely:** I have given way twice. May I continue?

**Mr Jones:** We opposed the programme motion because a major constitutional Act would have been put in place that was going to be discussed within 48 hours? The Wild Animals in Circuses Bill got more than that on the Floor of the House. The Government could have come back and said, “Right, we’ll renegotiate on a programme motion”. The usual channels on the Labour side were offering that, but it is up to the Government to do it. We have always said—this has been said by the Leader of the Opposition—that we would sit down to talk about a programme motion. It is the Government who have refused to do it, not the Opposition.

**Mr Seely:** I am not sure I buy that. I am sorry, but I simply do not. Every time we try to bring forward—

**Paul Farrelly:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Mr Seely:** I would like to just answer and then move on, if I may.

Every time we bring something to this House, the House tries to turn it into the political equivalent of a pushmi-pullyu. We tried to put a timetable motion through, and Labour Members voted against it, but now they want a timetable motion. You were offered three times—

**Paul Farrelly:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
Mr Seely: I am not giving way because I want to answer the point made by the right hon. Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). It is really important, and I would like to continue to make my point. Three times we had a withdrawal agreement this summer, and three times it was voted against, but now we are told you want that withdrawal agreement again. Whatever the right hon. Gentleman votes against, a week later they say, “Oh, why didn’t we get that back again?”

Mr Kevan Jones: I ask the hon. Gentleman a simple question. If the Government are so proud of the withdrawal agreement they have drawn up, why do they refuse to let the House discuss it? The House proposed a programme motion that could actually move it on today. If anyone is stopping Brexit, it is the Government.

Mr Seely: I do not buy that for one second. We had three withdrawal deal votes this summer.

Paul Farrelly: I do not want an extended debate on this, but there is another good reason why the hon. Gentleman is absolutely wrong. The Government have no control of the timetable because they have lost their majority by expelling Conservative Members with long and proud service, losing people to defections and losing the support of the Democratic Unionist party. The reason is, therefore, that the Government have been badly and recklessly led.

Mr Seely: Again, I do not buy that. The Government have been led very well, and I will explain why, although I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention.

Mrs Main: I want to give my hon. Friend a bit of a breather. I understand his frustration. Until the last incarnation of the withdrawal agreement, the Labour party—Her Majesty’s official Opposition—had set their face against a withdrawal Bill. Only five Members of Parliament—

Mr Kevan Jones: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Main: No. I am making an intervention on my hon. Friend. Eventually there was a consensus on the withdrawal agreement, so the next point of attack became how long we could discuss it. It is obvious to the country that there is a process that is coming to a conclusion. The conclusion should be that the withdrawal agreement is passed to give business and people certainty. Arguing about it will not get us anywhere.

Mr Seely: My hon. Friend is spot on. To answer the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Paul Farrelly), I think that the Prime Minister is acting in good faith. I personally have found him entirely reasonable in my dealings with him in the past couple of years. He was very supportive of a project that I helped to write earlier this year—he did not have to be.

The Prime Minister is trying to keep a promise that was made to the British people. In the Labour party manifesto, which Labour Members stood on, there was a promise to respect the referendum.

Mr Kevan Jones: I thank the hon. Lady for her intervention. The question was not framed in pejorative terms: are you voting for Britain to be greater, Britain to be smaller, Britain to be richer, Britain to be poorer? The question was a simple one: do you want Britain to leave the European Union?

Mr Seely: Thank you very much, Mr Speaker. I think I have been slightly thrown by taking so many interventions, so I am saying “you”. I know I should not and I apologise. If I may continue with the points that I was making—

Paul Farrelly: Do you know where you are?

Mr Seely: R oughly, yes. About 10 minutes ago, I was making the point that we needed a new Parliament, before I faced a host of helpful interventions from Labour Members. We need a new Parliament because we spend so much time talking about the same old thing; talking about Brexit endlessly, when there is so much else out there.

Mr Kevan Jones: rose—

Mr Seely: Please let me make some progress. I will let the right hon. Gentleman intervene a little later.

We need a new Parliament because there are so many other things that we need to debate. I am interested in debating the rise of autocracies in the world. We have significant issues regarding Huawei.

Justine Greening: My hon. Friend has just said that we need a new Parliament as if somehow a totally different electorate will be voting for people to represent them. Does he think that the people of our country made a mistake in 2017 with the Parliament they elected?

Mr Seely: No. My right hon. Friend makes a good point. I do not think the people made a mistake and one has to respect what they did. They read the Conservative
and Labour manifestos and 80% of Members were elected on a pledge to respect the wishes of the people in the 2016 referendum.

**Justine Greening:** But my hon. Friend will also know that at the bottom of page 36 of the Conservative manifesto it was clear that the party’s intention was to leave the European Union with both a withdrawal agreement and a future partnership agreed by the end of the article 50 period. Surely he accepts that that is now not what is being proposed, so the current proposal does not deliver what the Conservative party manifesto set out at the last election.

**Mr Seely:** Again, my right hon. Friend makes a perceptive point. It is not from lack of trying. We have had two withdrawal Bills. We have almost got to the point of a “take your pick” withdrawal Bill. We had one this summer, which Labour Members relentlessly voted against. Now many of them wish that they had not done so, because, humbly enough, they like the new withdrawal Bill even less.

**Jess Phillips:** The Prime Minister voted against it.

**Mr Seely:** He did, but then he voted for the last one.

**Jess Phillips:** No, carry on Bob.

**Mr Seely:** Thank you so much.

**Vicky Ford:** The Conservative party is, of course, the Conservative and Unionist party and I believe in equality across the Union. Many young people in my constituency might like the idea of votes at 16. Does my hon. Friend agree that it would be unfair if 16-year-olds had them in Scotland and in Wales, but not in England, and that instead of raising such topics at the last minute should be given to consider whether they are deliverable?

**Mr Seely:** I thank my hon. Friend for her point. Regardless of whether one agrees with the principle, we almost certainly do not have time to introduce such a measure by 12 December.

**Alison Thewliss** (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am sorry, but I do not buy the claim that we do not have time to deal with 16 and 17-year-olds voting. We have tabled amendments and spoken about the matter at every opportunity we have had in the House since 2015. On every occasion the Conservative Government have said that it is not the right time to do it. Why not just do it now?

**Mr Seely:** Lowering the age limit is a significant point of principle and one should not do it in a rush. In the case of many Bills that we introduce in haste, we repent at leisure.

**Graham P. Jones** (Hyndburn) (Lab): Is it not the case that the Labour party voted for Brexit—the one that was in our manifesto, rather than the Government’s version of Brexit? Labour has called for a customs union, but the Government have not offered that. Why should we support the Government’s deal, when it is not the promise we made to our own electorate?

**Mr Seely:** I suspect the answer to that is that I am sure the hon. Gentleman will enjoy telling his electorate why Brexit has not been passed. The hon. Gentleman believes that that is a competent answer. We look forward to seeing him back here. I clearly hope very much that I will be back here too, but I need to explain to my electorate why Opposition Members keep voting against Brexit and, thus far, keep voting against a general election.

**Mr Kevan Jones:** The hon. Gentleman says that Labour Members are constantly voting against Brexit, but he should remember that for two years and eight months this House had no say on Brexit because it was an internal debate within the Conservative party. He says that the Labour party opposed the deals. If he reads the Labour party manifesto, he will see that I stood on a clear commitment to not support no deal, and that a customs union and close integration with our European allies was key. My colleagues and I have stuck to our manifesto, and the idea that we have spent three years discussing Brexit is just not true.

**Mr Seely:** I would say that we have arguably spent 25 years debating it, certainly in some parts of Britain. Then we spent months before an election campaign and a couple of years afterwards debating it. The right hon. Gentleman is right to point out that those of us on the Government Benches are not perfect and that there was an argument within the Conservative party. Arguably, we did too long trying to work out the sort of Brexit that we wanted. I accept that point. It would be churlish of me to say that we are perfect and that the right hon. Gentleman’s side is not, but there is a basic principle here which I am very happy to explain to the good folks on the Isle of Wight. It is this: we have tried repeatedly to push through a realistic and sensible Brexit deal. We tried three times this summer. We tried again with the Prime Minister’s very good withdrawal deal. Granted, it did not like some elements relating to Northern Ireland, but we have to move on and try to make the best of what we can. We have not got that; because it has not been supported by this House. We then said that we need to go back to the people, but that has not been supported by this House. That is why I said a few minutes ago that the right hon. Gentleman’s leader is the first Leader of the Opposition in history who has not led and not opposed. I want him to do that because we need to have a general election.

**Mr Kevan Jones:** It was the Prime Minister and members of the European Research Group who voted down the previous Prime Minister’s deal, so the idea that he is somehow blameless in the process of stopping Brexit is not the case at all.

**Mr Seely:** I think the Prime Minister voted for two out of four, which is more than most Opposition Members. I have voted for four out of four and I will keep voting for any sensible Brexit withdrawal deal that comes our way.

**Graham P. Jones:** The hon. Gentleman says he will vote for any Brexit that comes forward. It has been seven or eight days now and the withdrawal agreement Bill has not been brought forward. I do not know why—it is rumoured that the Government are on strike and will not bring it back. In the Bill is an amendment
for a customs union. He says he will vote for any sensible option to get it through. Why does he not encourage the Prime Minister to bring the Bill back, vote for a customs union and get Brexit done?

**Mr Seely:** For me, a customs union is not a realistic Brexit and it is not the kind of Brexit that was voted for. That is not the sort of Brexit that many Labour voters want to see either. The Labour party actually did quite well in my patch at the last election. It got 16,000 or 17,000 votes. Half of those votes were from people who wanted Brexit and I think they will be very disappointed by the behaviour of the hon. Gentleman’s leadership in not voting for Brexit. I do not think it is in the interests of his party either. We all want to move on, because there is so much else to do.

**Mr Edward Vaizey** (Wantage) (Ind): Mr Speaker, I cannot work out whether you are eating popcorn as you watch this extraordinary spectacle of a great debate between two of our great parliamentarians play out across the Chamber.

**Mr Speaker:** Cashew nuts.

**Mr Vaizey:** Does my hon. Friend not agree with me that this election provides a fantastic opportunity for each of the main parties to set out in principle what they want to see from Brexit, and to finally address the point that the public voted to leave the European Union but are leaving it to parliamentarians to decide the best way of delivering Brexit? It is therefore incumbent on both main parties to set out their Brexit proposals. We can at least unite in this fractious Chamber by agreeing that no deal is not an option and that those who voted to stop no deal are the real heroes of Parliament.

**Mr Seely:** I thank my right hon. Friend for what I think was a friendly intervention. I am certainly learning to appreciate the benefit of friendly interventions.

**Mr Speaker:** May I say to the hon. Gentleman that it is normally known in the trade as in-flight refuelling?

**Mr Seely:** I have just been refuelled, Mr Speaker.

We were talking about the need for a new Parliament. There are many things that I would like a Parliament to spend much more time talking about instead of being so focused on Brexit. The rise of autocracies is a very serious issue. On Huawei, do we allow the use in this country of high tech from a communist party state, especially if its stated aim is to dominate global 5G in the years to come? I am wary of making the world safe for autocracies and one-party states. We need time to debate that.

Another issue is the ongoing disaster of Syria and the clear mistakes made by President Trump. There is also the need for integration of overseas foreign policy. We also have an exciting domestic agenda and I want us to talk more about that.

Finally, I want an Isle of Wight deal so that our public services are of the same standard as those on the mainland, or the north island, as we call it. Most parts of the United Kingdom that are isolated by water—in other words, islands—either have a fixed link, which we are never going to have because it would cost £3 billion, or more money through increased public expenditure, but the Island has neither, and that has been a structural flaw for many years.

The best way to deal with all of those problems is for us to agree to an election and to listen to our constituents, the folks in the places that we care for and love—

**Mr Vaizey:** Are you winding up?

**Mr Seely:** I am trying to. Does my right hon. Friend wish to intervene, or shall I just get on with it?

**Mr Vaizey:** No, I’m waiting for you to finish.

**Mr Seely:** Fantastic. For all those reasons, I very much want an election if we cannot have Brexit. Given that, thanks to the Labour party, Brexit now seems to be off the table, an election is the way forward.

3.46 pm

**Mr Pat McFadden** (Wolverhampton South East) (Lab): I begin with the revolutionary thought that if something was a bad idea yesterday, it might just be a bad idea today. I do not believe that the Prime Minister has been pushing for an election because it is impossible to get his deal through. After all, the proposal received its Second Reading last week. This is being done because the Prime Minister wants to avoid proper scrutiny of his proposals before he calls an election, and he has been desperate to run this election since the day he took office, no matter what he says about his reluctance.

There are two reasons that should give us pause for thought. First, depending on the outcome of an election, this does not take no deal off the table. The Prime Minister has made sure of that himself, through his own petulant decision to pull his withdrawal Bill before it could complete its parliamentary stages—before we could even begin the detailed scrutiny that a measure of this importance deserves. If no withdrawal Bill is being discussed before the poll takes place, no deal is still a possibility.

Moreover, we are only in the first phase of this negotiation. Not only is no deal a possibility in the first phase of withdrawal, but, as we know from the political declaration placed before us a week or so ago, it is also a distinct possibility in the second phase. In fact, it is more likely in the altered political declaration than it has been in the past. The possibility of a no-deal exit has not been removed. That is my first point.

**Dr Caroline Johnson:** Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that the only way to completely remove no deal from the table is either to revoke, which his party says it does not want at the moment, or to agree a deal, which his party blocks?

**Mr McFadden:** Those are not the only ways. There are three ways to avoid no deal: we can revoke, as the hon. Lady says, but that is not something we should do without the people having a say; we can agree a deal; or we can go back to the people. There is more than one possibility.

**Dr Caroline Johnson** rose—
Mr McFadden: I would like to proceed.

Secondly, what is the right way to reach a resolution on an issue that has been so difficult for us and for the country? Surely the right way to reach a resolution on Brexit, and on the proposals before us, is to properly and fully consider them—not to have the pre-cooked, pre-prepared tantrums of the Prime Minister. The withdrawal agreement Bill is a hugely important piece of legislation—perhaps the most important that this House has considered for many years—and it deserved proper scrutiny.

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is simply a dreadful deal, that the attack on workers’ rights, environmental protections and consumer protections is simply appalling, and that we need time to discuss these important matters?

Mr McFadden: I do. There are many other points about this deal that we should properly explore, not least because for the first time, the proposal before us is to have two Brexits, not one—one Brexit for one part of the country and another Brexit for the rest of the United Kingdom.

There are those who will say, “You have been discussing all this for three years; you have had plenty of time,” but as others have said in this debate, much of that time was taken up by an internal negotiation within the Conservative party and the Cabinet, with multiple Cabinet resignations, and the specific proposals before us were published only a couple of weeks ago. They are different from the proposals in the past.

Tim Loughton: The right hon. Gentleman said that he could not vote for the agreement because it still allowed the possibility of no deal and because that possibility of no deal could happen after the agreement was passed, and following the subsequent negotiations about the nature of the deal. So on that basis, he could never vote for a deal. There is all this nonsense about how we need more time for scrutiny and how all these years were wasted, but he was never going to vote for a European withdrawal Bill. He pledged in his party’s manifesto to uphold Brexit, but he is not going to do that. The only way out of this, therefore, is to have this election, which is why he should vote for it.

Mr McFadden: I voted for a number of proposals that would have kept us close to the EU economically, including customs unions, single market arrangements and other proposals. It is not the case that I have opposed everything.

Mr Vaizey: Anyone on the Government Benches who voted against the withdrawal agreement proposed by the last Prime Minister cannot really complain if other people voted against different versions of Brexit, because they clearly subscribe to the principle that their interpretation of Brexit should guide their vote.

Mr McFadden: The right hon. Gentleman makes a very wise point. When hon. Members such as the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) say, “You have blocked everything”, it is worth remembering that the people who were most vociferously opposed to the deal of the previous Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), were Members from her party, some of whom now occupy Cabinet positions. That is important in the argument to come.

The proposals before us were published only a couple of weeks ago and they depart from the previous proposals in several important ways. First, as I said, they propose two different Brexits for different parts of the UK—one for Northern Ireland and the other for the rest of the UK. Secondly, they chart a course for the future that is much more divergent on some of the rights that hon. Members have mentioned than was the case previously.

Alberto Costa: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr McFadden: I am going to wind up soon. In my view, the right way to have dealt with this issue is not to do what the Prime Minister has wanted to do since day one—to go for an election before these proposals could properly and fully be scrutinised by this House and the public—but to have proper scrutiny and debates and consider the amendments that would have been put forward. If we want to consult the public again on Brexit—as the Prime Minister said he wants to do time after time—and let them decide, why not consult them on the specific Brexit proposals of which he is now the champion? For those reasons, I do not think this is the only way to go.

Since the day he took office, it has been part of the Prime Minister’s plan to run a people versus Parliament campaign, despite having opposed several Brexit deals himself, and to blame everyone except the champions of this project for its not proceeding—to blame the European Commission, Parliament and sometimes the civil services and judges. But while this may have been part of his plan since day one, not all of us are willing to fold into it this evening.

3.55 pm

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): It is important that we have a general election. When the question about Brexit was asked in 2016, it was a matter of which side of the argument people supported. The hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), the leader of the Liberal Democrats, who looks as if she is about to leave her seat, says she looks forward to being in my constituency more often. I say to her: thank you—we have had the magazine with your name all over it. The hon. Lady, who is now leaving the debate, is promoting herself in my constituency as the next Prime Minister, so it is important that we look at what is being heralded by parties such as the Liberal Democrats in the next election.

When we had that 2016 question, it was not a tribal question; the question for us on the doorstep was not: “Is yours a party of remain or leave?” We were empowered to campaign for whichever side of the argument suited us best, and we all pledged to respect the result, whether we knocked on the door and said “I’d prefer to leave” or “I’d prefer to remain”. I stood in the marketplace in St Albans behind a market stall manned by Conservatives, some supporting remain and some supporting leave, showing that our party respected the right of people to determine that question, not along party lines but having lived the European project for 40-odd years. Some, including me, had never had the opportunity to vote on the matter; others were being asked a second time.
[Mrs Anne Main]

As I said in an intervention on the leader of the Liberal Democrats, who has now gone, along with all her colleagues—[Interruption] Oh, sorry. I did not recognise the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone) back there. He is a worthy stalwart, staying for the debate, which is not something the Liberal Democrats do very often. I am pleased he is here for my remarks.

As I said, the parties were free to campaign, and as I said to the hon. Lady, in 2008, for purposes of electoral expediency, seeing that David Cameron and the Conservatives—I was serving here at the time—were uncertain whether to offer a debate on the Lisbon treaty, which was being passed by the then Labour Government, the Liberal Democrats campaigned with a great big photograph of Nick Clegg all over a leaflet saying: “We are the party to offer a referendum.”

David Duguid (Banff and Buchan) (Con): My hon. Friend articulately expresses how the EU referendum result was not based on what parties campaigned for. Does she agree that it was not a country-by-country or constituency-by-constituency vote, but that it came down to every individual vote by every citizen across the United Kingdom?

Mrs Main: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. It is important that we go back and look at how we got to where we are in order to understand where we are going next. I am sorry about the history lesson, but it was in 2008 that the campaign started gathering momentum, simply because the Liberal Democrats were saying, “Only we will give you the choice.” I do not remember then or any time in between, until now, when it seems politically expedient, that any party campaigned to revoke. All of us, on whichever side of the in/out binary argument we stood, were free to campaign, hence the divide and the fact that there are Members with firmly held views, either for remain or leave, on each side of the House. Now the House and the political groupings have turned it into a party political campaign, and that is the problem.

Paul Farrelly: I am sorry to interrupt the hon. Lady’s attack on the Liberal Democrats. I did not vote for the referendum legislation, and I did not vote to trigger article 50, so I am certainly not going to vote for an early general election, which is opportunism from the Prime Minister and opportunism from the Liberal Democrats. However, the hon. Lady has a chance today to agree with the Liberal Democrats, because an amendment, if selected, could change the date to 9 December. If the Conservatives want an election as soon as possible, selected, could change the date to 9 December. If the Conservatives want an election as soon as possible, given the chronology—the 9th comes before the 12th—why are you sticking to the 12th?

Mrs Main: I assume that the word “you” was directed not at you, Mr Speaker, but at me, so I do not expect you to answer the hon. Gentleman’s question and tell us why you are not changing the date to the 9th, but I will answer it and say that I do not think the public will care one way or another. We have a tradition in this country of holding elections on Thursdays, but as for the guff and nonsense that we have heard in this place about people going to Christmas parties and school plays and all the rest of it, the public will think that that is a pretty trivial argument. I do not think it amounts to a hill of beans now: I think that the public are absolutely fed up.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Does my hon. Friend not think it bizarre that some people are arguing for a people’s vote 2019 when we have not yet implemented the people’s vote 2016?

Mrs Main: My right hon. Friend tempts me, and since there are no time limits, I may well wax lyrical on that point. However, it is important for us to get to the nub of the matter, which is that we have moved this away from being a choice for the people. I knocked on doors, and people said, “I am for leave” or “I am for remain”—

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Main: May I finish this point first? Otherwise I could be speaking for hours, and I am sure the House would rather I did not detain it for that long.

People came up to that market stall and said that they were for leave or for remain. I did not ask them, “Do you vote Liberal Democrat, do you vote Green, do you vote Labour?” Indeed, members of the Labour party have suggested that they agree with my views, while members of the Conservative party, such as my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), probably disagreed with my views at the time. All of us, at the time—well, I believe that the Liberal Democrats said that they would respect the vote—gave the impression that it was a once-in-a-lifetime choice, and a once-in-a-lifetime decision on which we would not renege and which we would not revoke: it would be delivered. It then came to a Parliament whose members were subsequently elected on the basis of their own political tribes.

Graham P. Jones rose—

Mrs Main: On political tribes, I shall give way.

Graham P. Jones: Will the hon. Lady please explain to me why the Government have not got Brexit through when they have had a majority for three years?

Mrs Main: Perhaps the arithmetic in the hon. Gentleman’s particular tribe is not as good as it might be. The Conservatives have not had a working majority for three years; there have been difficulties. However, the hon. Gentleman has fallen into the trap of seeing Brexit as a “political tribe” decision.

Andrew Bowie (West Aberdeenshire and Kincardine) (Con): Just about everyone in the Chamber said that they respected the result of the 2016 referendum and stood on manifestos in 2017 saying that they would honour that result. Why does my hon. Friend think they have backtracked and are retreating into their political tribes in respect of this very important issue?

Mrs Main: I can only hazard a guess that certain parties saw it as politically expedient to suggest or imply, in 2008 in the case of the Liberal Democrats or in 2017 in the case of the Conservatives and the Labour party, that they would indeed offer, or respect, a referendum. Now too many of the parties are finding it politically difficult.
This is not about us. It is not about individual parts of the United Kingdom and individual constituencies. This is not about the referendum campaign went. Nobody came and asked us questions on a constituency-by-constituency, country-by-country or region-by-region basis. We are in this mess now because we have turned the issue into a political football.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way, on that point?

Mrs Main: On political footballs? The hon. Gentleman plays the game very well, so I shall hand over to him.

Ian Murray: On the subject of football, if the hon. Lady would like to buy my new book on football, she is very welcome—and I thank her for allowing me to plug it.

The hon. Lady talks about manifestos; I stood on that manifesto in 2017 and was the director of Scottish Labour for the single market and the customs union, which would have taken us out of the European Union, but, given that the Conservative party decided not to try to seek a consensus and instead turned to its own tribes with the Prime Minister pandering to the extreme right, that was no longer on the table and therefore I moved to a position that if it is not on the table the best deal is to put it back to the people and let them decide.

Mrs Main: On a scintilla of that argument I completely agree with the hon. Gentleman. However, I am going to go back to the intervention of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire (Sir Greg Knight) about referendums, and the result the hon. Gentleman said he was not happy with is what he would now like to see not delivered in that particular way. His Front Bench, unfortunately, wishes to have the perverse situation of going back to the European Union, shredding the deal that has been agreed by 27 countries and that seems perfectly fit for purpose, if not perfect, and coming back with a better deal—because they are bound to offer the hon. Gentleman’s Front Bench a better deal!—in the full knowledge that the deal that would be better will then be campaigned against. It is a nonsense. To back—

Several hon. Members rose—

Mrs Main: I will not give way now as I want to respond to the intervention of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Yorkshire about honouring referendums.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Mrs Main: I will give way in a moment; I am in great—

Paul Farrelly: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Main: I hope the intervention is on this particular point of asking the same question, because I do wish to give way to my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean).

Paul Farrelly: My area, Newcastle-under-Lyme, voted 60% to 40%, some say 62% to 38%, to leave. During the last election I was re-elected—some thought it was a surprise. When I was asked about Brexit on the doorstep, I said that, first, it was for this House to determine how, but I was quite honest with the constituents that I thought our future would be better if we remained, and that was my straight answer. In St Albans, where 62% of people voted to remain, what is the hon. Lady’s answer to her constituents?

Mrs Main: I am glad the hon. Gentleman asked me that because my answer to my constituents then, now and in the future is that I completely respect democracy, and whatever democratic outcome was delivered I would respect. I am not here to argue against it or for it; I am here to argue to deliver it. And I hope, since the political make-up of the hon. Gentleman’s seat is very like mine—I do not dispute that in any way whatsoever—that he will be arguing, as I do, that the British public, as we need to heal—

Paul Farrelly: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Mrs Main: No, I am not going to have a two-way debate with the hon. Gentleman on this particular matter.

Paul Farrelly rose—

Mrs Main: No; I said no, and I say no twice. Mr Speaker made a ruling on this earlier on, so the answer is no.

What I will be arguing, as indeed we are arguing, is that we gave the in/out choice, regardless of political parties, and the in/out choice was delivered. Some people did not like it, and some constituencies did not match up with what their MP wanted, but that is not what it is about; what it is about—

Rachel Maclean rose—

Mrs Main: I will take my hon. Friend’s intervention before I get to that point.

Rachel Maclean: I thank my hon. Friend very much for allowing me to intervene on her fantastic speech. She is making a number of points that I agree with extremely strongly. I voted remain in the original referendum, but my very strong feeling the day after the referendum, when we saw that overwhelming desire to leave the European Union, was that I should passionately support democracy in this country. Ever since that day I have supported that vote, even though I am a remainer, because I think we have one thing to do in this House, which is keep our promises to the electorate. Does my hon. Friend agree with that, and does she find that people who voted remain in her constituency share this desire to honour democracy above all else?

Mrs Main: I absolutely accept my hon. Friend’s point. I accept that there are people in my constituency, as there will be in others, who fervently wish to overturn the result and to back remain. However, most people I
speak to, when asked, feel that revoking would be a step too far. Most of them say, “I just want it over and done with. I want a deal.” I believe that this Government have tried to deliver exactly that. The last Prime Minister tried to deliver exactly that. She, like my hon. Friend the Member for Redditch (Rachel Maclean), made it clear that she was a remainer, but like me she vowed to respect democracy. The fact that I am mismatched with my seat might be something that political opponents wish to capitalise on, but the fundamental question we need to ask ourselves is whether we value political self-interest more than the trust, the pledge and the contract that we all made when that referendum was called.

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): Will the hon. Lady give way on that point?

Mrs Main: On the point about honouring contracts, I shall take the hon. Gentleman’s intervention.

Martin Whitfield: Honouring contracts: an excellent input. I should like to draw the hon. Lady slightly back towards the Bill that is before us today, which she no doubt fully supports—quite rightly, in her own mind. Does she agree that the accompanying notes to the Bill confirm that it deals with the franchise for the election and the date of the election, as discussed? The notes state:

“The Parliament of the United Kingdom and parliamentary elections, including the franchise and disqualifications for membership of that Parliament, are an excepted matter under paragraph 2 of Schedule 2 to the Northern Ireland Act 1998.”

I ask this specifically with regard to the importance of the Bill, which is addressing a general election.

Mrs Main: Yes, we are discussing a Bill about having a general election. My point is that we need a general election because we have moved so far away from the original concept of the referendum, which was a choice between in and out, not a party political choice. Now, we are in a sclerotic position. We cannot move forward in here, and the only obvious answer is to ask the public to decide.

Mr Kevan Jones rose—

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab) rose—

Mrs Main: Can I just answer the previous intervention before I take any more?

If it is somehow politically expedient for some people to vote tonight for an election, I would say that they are putting their own considerations before those of the country. This should not be about us. This should not be about us looking at poll ratings and saying, “Does it suit me and my campaign to go to the country now?” This should be about us remembering what we said in 2016 or—as I said in my intervention on the Liberal Democrats—remembering what we tempted the public with in 2008. I will stand corrected if I am wrong, but I do not believe that any party ever said, “We will offer you a referendum, but if we don’t like the result we will frustrate it and campaign against it to try to get a different one”, or worse, “We will ignore the result.”

I am waiting for the “Ooh!” and the jumping up and down from the Scot Nats when I say this, but I believe that they are hoping against hope that they can have a referendum and—hopefully, according to their agenda—deliver an independent Scotland. I hope that before this House grants any such independence referendum, they will have a full deal to put on the table, very much like they are saying we should do on the European Union. I hope that they would first have an answer on the fisheries policy, the euro, the border and all the other hard concerns they have about the Northern Ireland question. The reality is that a referendum is never formed in those terms. The previous one was not, and a future one would not be. The reality is that we asked the question: in or out? [ Interruption. ]

David Duguid: I apologise for interrupting my hon. Friend’s articulate flow once again. I could not help but hear the chuntering from a sedentary position on the SNP Benches. I believe that there were 617 pages in the White Paper on Scotland’s future that was published in advance of the 2014 independence referendum. On page 217 of that document, it clearly told the people of Scotland—[ Interruption. ] Page 217—do Members know where I am going with this? It told the people of Scotland that if they voted against independence, there was a risk of Scotland remaining in the UK and the UK then holding a referendum on EU membership, as that referendum had been announced by that time. Despite that warning, Scotland still voted to remain in the UK.

Mrs Main: My hon. Friend knows the minutiae of the 600-page White Paper produced by the Scots Nats. I am sure it was his bedtime reading.

Mike Kane: On the sclerotic nature of this Parliament and whether a general election will somehow change that, will it ever? Brexit has been a virus in a vial in a nightstand by the Tory party bed for 40 years. Occasionally, it would break and infect the Conservative party, which would catch a cold, and maybe the Labour party would win an election. You unleashed a referendum and broke the vial across the whole country, and we have all caught the cold. Churchill said that fanatics were people who will not change their mind and could not change the subject. Brexit will not be solved by a general election.

Mrs Main: I do not blame you at all for unleashing a vial across anybody, Mr Speaker. I understand the hon. Gentleman’s point, but the point is that the people were asked. We cannot now say we should not have asked the question. Plenty of colleagues went around the country framing the arguments—plenty of colleagues framed the arguments for, and plenty of colleagues framed the argument against.

I come back to the point that the only reason we need a general election now is that the public have seen how we have behaved in here. The public have seen which party is the most likely to honour its pledges made to the British people in 2017, which party came out with an original concept of the referendum, which was a choice between in and out, not a party political choice now. I will stand corrected if I am wrong, but I do not believe that any party ever said, “We will offer you a referendum, but if we don’t like the result we will frustrate it and campaign against it to try to get a different one”, or worse, “We will ignore the result.”

Mr Marcus Fysh (Yeovil) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that this is also about ending uncertainty? Only with a general election and a Conservative victory can we show the path of certainty.
Mrs Main: I agree, but we also need to get on and discuss all the other issues. For example—this is not the most important thing for me, but it is important—St Albans has what claims to be the oldest public school in the world. It is right slap bang next to the cathedral. It is iconic. I have been in contact with parents—I am meeting another group on Friday—who are extremely concerned that the Labour party will remove the school’s charitable status if it is elected. They are extremely concerned that the Lib Dems will charge the school VAT. Businesses are extremely concerned that they do not have certainty about what to do next. People are pleased to hear about the £400 million investment in hospitals in St Albans and Hertfordshire, and they are extremely pleased that St Albans schools have received above-average cash injections. They want to hear about all these other topics. My hon. Friend is right that Brexit is drowning out the scrutiny of all these other things.

I want to remind the people in St Albans that the Labour Government left a little note when they left office saying that there was no money left. I want to remind St Albans that we now have the lowest number of unemployed young people since records began. I want to remind people in St Albans that there have been 500,000 new apprenticeships. I want to remind people in St Albans that we have lifted loads of people and families out of paying income tax at all, and that came from a Conservative Government. I want to be discussing those topics. The interminable vial of Brexit to which the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane) referred is being kept active in here.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): It is dangerous to continue this “people versus Parliament” narrative, saying that Parliament is somehow frustrating the process. The reason we have not been able to coalesce around a deal is that the two deals that have been on the table have been terrible for this country. Diligence and integrity are required to ensure that we make the right decision. Has the hon. Lady read the impact assessment?

Mrs Main: Yes, I have. However, when we got into government with the Liberal Democrats, this negotiation was ongoing. I have enjoyed every second of my hon. Friend’s 29-minute speech, and I am grateful to get in just before the end of her remarks, because I know that she is going to give way soon to others who want to contribute to this debate. Given the seat she represents, I know that she agrees that one issue we will want to talk about in the election, apart from Brexit, is culture
and heritage. That issue is close to my heart and hers, so in the last couple of minutes of her speech I would like her just to acknowledge that.

Mrs Main: The right hon. Gentleman tempts me, because the culture and heritage goes back to the Romans in St Albans and I could talk about it for a very long time. Indeed, my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and I have a wonderful picture of the new St Albans museum, in the centre of my beautiful city; before he was Prime Minister, he came to St Albans and congratulated the Conservative-led council on delivering a fabulous museum, which is to the absolute enhancement of my constituency.

I will move on to the general election—[Interruption.] Is shouting down democracy something we agree with in this House? As far as I can see, this House says it wants more time to debate things, but when an hon. Member stands on her hind legs and starts debating things, they do not want her to have that amount of time—they want to run on to other Opposition groups or to other Members in the House. On something as important as this, the people need to know, even if it is Brenda of Bristol, why on earth we are troubling them yet again with another election.

Jamie Stone (Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross) (LD): On that point—

Mrs Main: On Brenda of Bristol, I shall give way.

Mr Speaker: Has the hon. Lady completed her oration?

Mrs Main indicated dissent.

Mr Speaker: No, she is taking an intervention from none other than the hon. Member for Caithness, Sutherland and Easter Ross (Jamie Stone)

Jamie Stone: Mr Speaker, I rise as the unrecognised Liberal Democrat in this place and I apologise to the Chamber. Let me get back to the issue of the election itself. I represent the coldest and most northerly constituency in the British mainland. It is going to get dark a hell of a lot earlier where I come from than it does in St Albans, and the streets and roads are going to be an awful lot icier. This is perhaps an appeal for the Leader of the House, who is not with us at this precise moment, but may I ask the Government to co-ordinate as closely as possible with the Scottish Government to make sure that the streets and roads are safe for the people who want to come out to exercise their democratic right?

Mrs Main: I am not sure how that related to Brenda of Bristol, but the point I wish to make, before I start concluding my remarks, is that in 2017 the public were sick of the idea of having an election but they turned out and they mostly elected the two biggest parties, on a mandate to deliver. This House, for whatever reasons it wishes to conclude, has been letting the public down. The binary choice of in or out has been turned into a political football. Now the parties need to draft their manifestos. They need to firm up their mandates and be honest about what they wish to do. They need to tell the public that if a party is elected with a strong mandate, the horse-trading will stop, the deals will stop and the taking over of the agenda by the Opposition or other individual groups with their own little axe to grind will stop. The parties need to say that a Government will be able to deliver on all the additional funding pledged in the Queen’s Speech and on Brexit, and that the next Government, unless they are a Government who are asked to oppose Brexit, will be delivering on the pledge to deliver to the people.

I hope that today there will be a vote for a general election, and not for political expediency. All of us should be saying sorry to the public for putting them through it again. We should be saying sorry for the dark streets, the cold nights, and the cancelled Christmas decorations or whatever else was going on in halls that are now going to be having election proceedings. All of us need to apologise to the public and say, “Sorry, when you told us to leave, we weren’t actually sure you meant it.”

I believe the public meant it. I know that other Members wish to speak today, including the hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), who was not here for the whole debate—

Mr Vaizey: Right honourable.

Mrs Main: He has risen to right. hon.—I am so sorry—

Mrs Main: On Brenda of Bristol, I wish to apologise. He wishes to speak. When we are going out on the doorstep, we should remember that that person who voted in or out did not vote Conservative, Green, Labour or Liberal—they voted in or out. We need to respect that. We gave them a choice. It is insulting the public to say that we should not have given them the choice, as someone on the Opposition Benches has said, that they were too stupid to make the choice, as some have said, or that some of them are dead now and so we will ask people again. So may I make the plea that tonight we go for a general election, even though it or the timing may not suit all of us? What it should do is resolve this issue of a zombie Parliament incapable of action and deliver a Conservative Government who will deliver on their promise, their mandate and their pledge to uphold democracy.

4.30 pm

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): I wonder why on earth we need a four-hour debate, because we have a very simple choice: we either want to vote for a general election or we do not. I voted for a general election last night and I will vote for one tonight. Let us be truthful: I do not think anybody in the House, listening here or in their rooms or wherever they are listening, will change their mind one iota on how they are going to vote because of this four-hour debate. Some Members are probably using the debate more as an election address. I do not have to do that, because I am not standing again, but I want to say why I will support a general election in the vote tonight.

Let us not forget that the public have been looking into Parliament a great deal more in these last few months than ever before. What they have seen is a Parliament that does not and cannot allow the Government to govern. The Government do not have a majority. The Government have not been able to get their withdrawal deal through; they have not been able to get much else through. Without doubt, there are Members who will never vote for any withdrawal agreement whatsoever, no matter how wonderful it is, because they do not want
to leave the European Union, and the reality is that people out there know that. They know that we now have a Parliament that is a bit of a shambles.

Anyone who goes out and talks the public, whatever their views and however they voted in the referendum, will know that they think this Parliament is a bit of a shambles. They are seeing that even today. A simple vote on whether we have a general election is now being turned into a debate, with very little time, on whether we want 16 and 17-year-olds to be added to the electoral register and whether we want to give European Union citizens the right to vote. Even if I supported those proposals 100%, this is not the time to be changing who is on the voting register; in reality, it is pretty difficult for that to happen before a general election on 9 December or 12 December.

Mr Fysh: Does the hon. Lady agree that people outside might think it a little disingenuous of some Members to say that they want to vote for an election, while seeking to add wrecking amendments, such as votes for children or for EU nationals?

Kate Hoey: A lot of people who have seen how Parliament works over the past few months will have seen that wrecking amendments, delaying amendments and procrastination are now part and parcel of how we work in this Chamber. That is why we are here now talking about a general election.

The last general election we had, in 2017, was entirely unnecessary. Many people know that it was ridiculous to have a general election and the public punished the party that called the general election, when it had a majority and there was no need for a general election. The situation is very different now, because the Government cannot govern and the public deserve the right to have a Government, of whatever party, who can get their business through the House and who can get some general sanity into what we are doing in our procedures.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am very grateful to the hon. Lady for allowing me to intervene. As she and I both serve on Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, she will be well aware that the essential legislation to compensate the victims in Northern Ireland of appalling historical institutional abuse began its progress through Westminster in the other place. If we were to dissolve on 6 November, she knows perfectly well that those victims of historical institutional abuse who have waited so patiently and with such dignity for so long will not be able to see that legislation pass through this House in time for them to have that compensation. How does she feel about supporting an early election and, in so doing, doing down the victims of historical institutional abuse?

Kate Hoey: I take it that the hon. Lady will be voting against the general election.

Lady Hermon indicated assent.

Kate Hoey: I do think that that is a hugely important issue, which has unity across this House. If the Leader of the House, who has just left his place, and the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland really wanted to get that Bill through, they could do so this week. It could still be put through this week. It passed its Second Reading in the other place last night, so there is absolutely no reason why we cannot get that Bill through. Yes, the hon. Lady is right. There will be many things that we cannot get through, but there are also an awful lot of things that we should be getting through but we are not able to do so because there is no majority for them in this House.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thought that I heard the Leader of the House say that one reason for keeping the House going until 6 November was to get that Bill through. It would be iniquitous if we do not get this Bill through, because people in Northern Ireland really require to have it passed.

Kate Hoey: I absolutely agree with the hon. Gentleman. I hope that those whose business it is can sort out what we do over the next few days. As I understand it—I am sure that other people know more than I do on this—if there is not a general election until 12 December, we will not have to dissolve until the following Thursday, which means that there is time. If there is unity in the House about that very important measure then it could be put through.

I know, too, Mr Speaker, that you have made your decision about leaving this House. I see no reason why the election of a new Speaker could not have been brought forward to this week, so that the issue could have been resolved before Parliament dissolves. I am getting away from the Bill, and I know, Mr Speaker, that you would not want me to do that.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): I am most grateful to the hon. Lady for giving way. Under the previous Labour Government when Gordon Brown was Prime Minister, was not the question of giving voting rights to overseas citizens living here raised and looked at by Lord Goldsmith, who concluded that full voting rights should be given only to UK citizens?

Kate Hoey: I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman will be able to make a contribution in Committee, when we will know more about the detail of that amendment, but I certainly will not support it. I do not support it, and I certainly do not support, as I have said earlier, either of those changes being introduced in this Bill at this time. What this legislation is about is whether we want a general election.

In my view, every political party and every candidate standing in the election will have to be very clear about their position on what will happen about our leaving the EU and honouring the result of the referendum. Members have mentioned a people’s vote. I waited 40 years after we joined the Common Market to get another referendum. We have not implemented this referendum, so I am very pleased that there does not seem to be a majority in this House for another referendum. None the less, it is absolutely clear that we just cannot go on like this in our Parliament. We must resolve this issue. I hope that when the parties put forward their manifestos, they will be very clear that this withdrawal agreement can still be looked at and changed.

I hope that they will see that the terrible part of this deal, which to me really stands out, is the way that Northern Ireland has been treated. We cannot allow that to happen. I know that there are lots of talks going on about how this can be changed. I believe that we should be leaving as a whole United Kingdom, not
leaving Northern Ireland different and separate. That can be solved and it needs to be solved if we are finally to get an agreement through this House.

It is important that the public see that we have finally said that we accept that there is not a majority for anything really happening in this House over leaving the EU. I blame those Members of Parliament on both sides of the House who decided very early on that they would do what they could to prevent us from leaving. They have been very successful, but I do not think they will be as successful when it comes to the general election.

4.40 pm

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): The question before us today is: do we want a general election? Do the public want a general election and do the politicians want a general election? I do not think that anybody wants a general election. If we have an election in December, it will be the third time in three years that my electorate have been asked for their vote, and I hope that they give the same answer this time. But what people do want is Brexit to be delivered.

My constituency of Sleaford and North Hykeham voted overwhelmingly to leave. The country as a whole voted to leave, but even the constituents I meet who voted remain—including business owners and people who run businesses—also want Brexit done. They tell me, “Look, we really wanted to stay and to start with we voted to leave, and it is up to us as representatives to deliver Brexit on their behalf. But we have now a perfect storm, whereby the representatives do not agree with the delegated decision of the British people. We delegated the responsibility for this one decision to them, asking them, “What do you want to us to do? This is such a momentous decision that we want you to make it for us.” They said that they wanted to leave, and it is up to us as representatives to deliver Brexit on their behalf. But we have now a perfect storm, whereby the representatives do not agree with the delegated decision of the British people, and the Government lack a parliamentary majority with which to deliver their will. Under this Prime Minister, the Government have tried every single avenue open to us to deliver Brexit.

Mr Kevan Jones: What the hon. Lady is saying is not exactly true, is it? It took her party two years and eight months to put anything to this House. The Government now have a Bill that has passed its Second Reading and could actually go forward, so it is not the case that an election is somehow going to deliver Brexit. The architect of stalling the Brexit process was the present Prime Minister, when he voted against the former Prime Minister’s original withdrawal deal.

Dr Johnson: The point I was trying to make is that the Government have tried every avenue to deliver Brexit, but this Parliament and this Opposition have done everything they can to stop it.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): The argument that the proper thing to have done was to extend the time available is undermined by the fact that the greatest enthusiasts for that voted in principle against the Bill. By “scrutiny” they merely mean amending the Bill so that it no longer represents the agreement and the negotiations have to be restarted and the whole wretched cycle can begin again.

Dr Johnson: My right hon. Friend is exactly right.

The Prime Minister was told that he could not reopen the withdrawal agreement, but he did. He was then told that he could not remove the backstop from that agreement and could not gain other important changes, but he did. He was then told that he could not get a deal that, in principle, was voted for and supported by this House, and on Second Reading he did. But then the Opposition voted to prevent it from being discussed, because it cannot be discussed without a timetabling motion, and they voted against that.

Mr Kevan Jones rose—

Dr Johnson: I have given way to the hon. Gentleman already.

This is a question of trust. The British people trust us to deliver on our promises, and if we do not deliver on our promises we undermine the basis of democracy. The leaflet that came out during the European referendum said: “We will implement what you decide.” Many people, some of whom had never voted for the whole of their lives because they felt it did not make anything change, went and voted in the European referendum because they thought it would make a difference. It was the biggest democratic exercise in our country’s history and a majority voted to leave—and leave we must.

The Opposition are playing party politics, because their only determination is to try to make sure that Brexit cannot happen by the 31st. That is because they think the public are stupid. They think the public will say, “Ah—the Prime Minister did not deliver Brexit by the 31st, so we can go to the country and say that he did not keep his promise.” But actually the public are not stupid. They can see that the reason we have not delivered it by the 31st is that the Opposition voted to institute the European Union (Withdrawal) No. 2 Bill, which surrendered control of when we leave to the European Union.

I want to deal with the issues in the amendments. The first amendment would allow all EU voters living in this country to vote. Quite apart from the fact that this has not been properly debated, it is very difficult to add 3 million voters to the register at very short notice. It would also have—

Mr Speaker: Order. I just say very gently to the hon. Lady that a copy of prospective amendments has been made available. But the time for debate upon amendments is at the Committee stage for which they are intended. Therefore, briefly to animadvert to a possible amendment is disorderly, but to dilate upon it is not.
Mr Speaker: Order. I am not sure whether that was done in an arch way. It was advertised, and it has attracted the attention of the Clerk at the Table and of the Chair, but in any case I know that the hon. Lady will unfailingly sign up to the nostrum that two wrongs do not make a right.

Dr Johnson: Absolutely, Mr Speaker.

I would like to discuss the issue of European citizens, which has already been mentioned during the debate. It would be very difficult to add 3 million voters to the electoral register at short notice, and the relative size of constituencies would be affected. It is notable that some, like my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely), who was here earlier, have constituencies of more than 100,000 people, while others have constituencies of just 20,000 people. I know that there has been an effort by the Boundary Commission to introduce changes that would even those up, but suddenly adding European voters would have an impact on the relative value of an individual’s vote. It is also notable that none of the EU27 member states allows citizens not from their country to vote in a general election, and with free movement of just 20,000 people, I have over time seen and treated a number of young people at 16. I have met some very, very mature 16-year-olds with great life experience who no doubt have the knowledge and maturity to vote, but I have also met 16-year-olds who do not. It is worth looking at the international—

Peter Kyle (Hove) (Lab): I put forward a private Member’s Bill to try to extend the franchise. Does the hon. Lady not agree that if we start to put up arbitrary barriers and set tests for 16 and 17-year-olds, we should set the same tests for other age groups? If she set a maturity test for 16-year-olds, I can bet her that the Prime Minister would not pass it.

Dr Johnson: I am reminded of the fact that when people start to get personal towards the Prime Minister or others, it is because they do not have a political argument to make.

It is useful to look at international norms. The United Nations, which we are part of, sees 18-year-olds as adults. Internationally, refugees are seen as children if they are less than 18 years old. We are part of the Five Eyes group, along with Australia, New Zealand, America and Canada, all of which allow votes only from 18. All EU member states, apart from Austria, allow votes only from 18. As a children’s doctor—

Mr Speaker: Order. I ask the hon. Lady to resume her seat. Either entirely of her own initiative—which is perfectly credible, because she is a most assiduous parliamentarian—or because she has been exhorted by others, or maybe a judicious combination of the two, she seems inclined to do precisely what I told her she should not do, which is to dilate on matters that, as things stand, are outwith the scope of the Bill. I cannot in all conscience encourage her to persist with her global tour, and potentially her intergalactic tour, in pursuit of evidence that she wishes to adduce on the matter of the appropriate age at which people should vote. What I have tried to tell her courteously, and which I now tell her courteously but bluntly, is that those matters are not currently up for discussion. It will not suffice for her to smile at me and say, “Mr Speaker, I am most grateful for your guidance,” with a view then to comprehensively ignoring it.

Dr Johnson: Thank you, Mr Speaker; I appreciate your guidance on this matter. I hope you will not mind my responding to the comments made by the leader of the Liberal Democrats, the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson), who said that our children should have a vote because it matters to their future. This will affect my four, eight and 12-year-olds’ futures even more, but that is not a rational argument for them to vote.

I am concerned that the amendments that have been tabled are wrecking amendments, because they are trying to change the franchise just before an election. Were that to happen against the Electoral Commission’s advice, we would not be able to have an election in December.

Sir Greg Knight: My hon. Friend is making a powerful case. I think she is saying that the Bill should be left as it is not only on Second Reading but beyond it, to maximise support for it.

Dr Johnson: Thank you my right hon. Friend for his intervention; he is right.

We need to deliver Brexit and get on with the priorities of the British people. People in my constituency want more police, more money for schools, better broadband and a strong economy—all the things that were promised in the Queen’s Speech. This Parliament needs to be honest with the people. If Members do not want to deliver Brexit, they should be honest about that and say to voters that they do not want to deliver Brexit, then see whether they are returned. We are at an impasse where the only solution to get Brexit done, whether we want one or not, is to have a general election now.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I am most grateful to the hon. Lady. May I politely suggest that colleagues have care and concern for each other? Each of them wishes to speak. It is not necessary or desirable for one person to speak at inordinate length and then say, either openly or to themselves, “Whoops! Sorry, I stopped someone else doing so.” It is better to avoid that grisly fate.

4.53 pm

Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): I agree. I plan to say a number of things, but I want to follow up on some of the things that have been said during the debate. There has been a huge amount of talk about being honest with the public, political expediency and turning the referendum into a party political thing. The hon. Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) seemed very concerned that the referendum and how we vote on Bills has been used for political expediency. I would like to gently remind everybody of the time that the Prime Minister got a camera crew to come and take a picture
of him as he signed his little resignation letter to Theresa May—sorry, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May). Some might say that it had been politically expedient and, lo and behold, he is now the Prime Minister. Gosh forbid that anybody should use things for political expediency or that Conservative Members have always voted for the Bill.

The trouble with the arguments we are having is that the Government have continued to behave like a Government who have a majority, regardless of the fact that they do not. The right hon. Member for Maidenhead suffered exactly the same problem after the referendum, which was not won decisively by one side—it was a marginal win—and after the 2017 election, when again the country was split, and the idea of bringing forward a Bill that we could all sit down and work on was literally never ever taken forward.

I have listened to Conservative Members saying today, “Well, you shouldn’t be allowed to amend the Bill”, or “You only want time to amend it”. Er, yes—that is absolutely right, because that is the job of this House. Different people come here from different backgrounds and make laws that are not just for one sort of person, but that represent this country. I seem to be in a twilight zone where the Government and the Executive seem to think that they just write a line and then go, “Er, well, it’s my way or the highway”. Welcome to parliamentary democracy!

Mr Kevan Jones: Does my hon. Friend agree with me that it is even worse than that because Parliament was excluded from this process for two years and eight months while the Conservative party had an internal debate about what type of Brexit they could get through, and it was only then that this House was let in to the debate about what type of Brexit they could get through months while the Conservative party had an internal excluded from this process for two years and eight


I represent a leave seat, and, as we enter this general election, I may face the fate for my beliefs that the hon. Member for St Albans fears that she will face—and that is okay. She thinks it is okay, and I think it is okay that I may have done something different from what the majority of my constituents did, regardless of the fact that 10,000 extra of them voted for me post the referendum.

The reality is that the Government have only ever pretended that it is about anything else? It will not be about the fact that people in my constituency will not be able to send their kids to school five days a week, or how beautiful the islands are. The reality is that we have all talked about the referendum. This is going to be a Brexit referendum whether we like it or not, except that we will not be being clear and we will not be being honest—none of us will be—and in what we get back we will be able to see whatever we want to see.

I have heard people in here say that I as a Labour voter voted to deliver Brexit based on the last general election, and that is simply not true. I did not do that. As a Labour voter, I voted for many, many things that I believe in about Labour values. My vote had nothing to do with the Brexit position of my political party and I would say the same if I was not a representative of it. We are going to dishonestly use a general election. It will not be about the fact that people in my constituency cannot send their kids to school five days a week, or about whether the NHS is serving them properly, or about whether they are happy with something that the Conservative party might say. We are going to use the general election for political expediency. Can we all stop pretending that it is about anything else?

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): I thank the hon. Lady for making a passionate and amusing speech. I believe that she is making the argument for a further referendum. How long would it take this place to legislate for that and how long has the EU given us in the current extension?

Jess Phillips: The honest answer—I have truck with honesty—is that I am not entirely sure, but does the hon. Lady understand that we tried to get the biggest piece of legislation through this House in three days? I am certain that the wit of the people in this Chamber could organise a referendum, even to be on the same day as a general election.

I do not particularly like the idea of a general election in December for all the reasons people have mentioned. The main thing I do not like is exactly what I have said: it will be used by people afterwards to say that it meant what they wanted it to mean. That applies not just to
the Government side, but to the Opposition. No one can answer the question of what happens when we return a hung Parliament to this place and we are stuck once again in Brexit paralysis. What will we do then? No one is answering that question because everybody is acting completely arrogantly and doing that thing we all do on the stump when we say, “Here’s the next Prime Minister” even if we are in a minority party with about four people in it. It is totally ridiculous. It does not do all do on the stump when we say, “Here’s the next Prime Minister” even if we are in a minority party with about four people in it. It is totally ridiculous. It does not answer the question of what we do if we return a hung Parliament that, just like in 2017, is split exactly down the middle and we cannot get anything through.

Mr Fysh: What is the hon. Lady’s view of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 in such a situation, where hung Parliaments cannot do anything? Should we look at abolishing it? Would the Labour party support that?

Jess Phillips: I do not speak for the Labour Front Bench or those who make policy, but the Act seems to have caused paralysis. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that there is nothing ideal about the situations that any of us have found ourselves in since 2016. None of this is ideal. Frankly, it needed people who could put most things aside and try to do what was best, and I am afraid that this House has largely failed in that endeavour to try to find consensus.

And so we face the future. After the next general election, will we all agree to try to build a consensus, if it returns a hung Parliament with no clear line? Will we all put that in our manifestos? I do not know the answer to that. “Make it end” could just carry on in perpetuity. Nobody wants that.

I want to build consensus. A man was arrested and charged for trying to break into my office, calling me a fascist because I would not vote for the deal. I asked for him to be shown leniency in court, and I asked for us to be able to sit down and talk to each other because I do not believe that I cannot find something in common with this man who is the same age as me and grew up streets away from me. I believe we can find consensus, but I am not sure a general election campaign is where we will find it.

I can guarantee to all hon. Members that an onslaught of money will come from who knows where to fund propaganda in our election: when our electoral laws in this country are currently not fit for purpose; when we are about to enter into a battle where foreign funding can flood into our system; where the Prime Minister’s chief of staff, who led a campaign that has been found to have broken the law, is going to be in charge of some of that propaganda machine; and when the Prime Minister himself refuses to answer direct questions on exactly his role in the decision-making and when he found out.

In the recent European Parliament election, a man stood on a platform, completely legitimately, when the thing that made him most famous was whether he would or would not rape me. Our electoral laws are not fit for purpose. So what are we all going to do—al of us sitting here pretending that what we want is honesty and that we do not just want to win? What are we all going to do during the election campaign to make sure it is fair, to make sure it is legal and to make sure that it is not trying to say from the other side that people like me are a danger to the country or from my side that people like you are, so that people who hear that turn up and try to break into my office, scream in face and send me death threats? What are we going to do? It might be much easier for everybody to get a one-line Bill through, but a one-line Bill on an election does not answer a single one of the questions that every single person in this place has been asking for a very long time.

I shall finish my remarks by saying that I will gladly go back and sleep in my own bed for a solid six weeks, see my children every day and join the camaraderie of the hundreds and hundreds of volunteers who will join me in my seat as they do every time we have an election, but what happens next is the question that nobody can answer. Until that is the case, the one-line Bill is useless.

5.7 pm

Mr Edward Vaizey: I am grateful to have been called when I was not able to be present for the whole debate. I will try to keep my remarks brief, because I know that other colleagues want to speak.

It is an example of the journey I have made in my 14 years in this House that my maiden speech was a Eurosceptic speech that followed a speech by a Labour Eurosceptic, the hon. Member for Luton North (Kelvin Hopkins). I will now make a resolutely pro-remain, pro-European speech following the excellent speech by one of the Members whom I most admire in this House, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips).

Mr Speaker: Order. May I just very gently say, because the right hon. Gentleman implied that he would be brief—I hope, mercifully, that he will be brief, brilliant though he is—that there is no need for him to make either a pro-European or an anti-European speech, or a speech anywhere between the two? There is a need for him to make a speech about whether there should or should not be an early general election, nothing more. It will be delivered with an eloquence worthy of Demosthenes and an intellect to rival Einstein’s, I feel certain.

Mr Vaizey: I have to say, Mr Speaker, that the minute you rose I realised the error I had made in speaking injudiciously and inaccurately. From now on, I will take a forensic approach. The point I was going to make was that I support the call for an election. It is quite right that we try to break the deadlock that exists in Parliament by having an election as soon as possible. I am also mindful—I have listened to every word you have said in this Chamber, Mr Speaker—that I am not going to speak about any of the amendments. All I will say is that the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley raised important points and the amendments, if they are called, will also raise important points.

There are important debates to be had in this Chamber about the shape and form of elections. I am open to the idea, for example, of 16-year-olds voting. I am open to the idea of our European friends who live here and contribute their taxes voting. In particular, I take on board the point the hon. Lady made about money and lies. We know that in a digital age the propaganda pumped out on tech platforms will be a huge issue in this election and in future elections. When this House returns after the election, I hope that that will be one of the issues that is addressed.

Many hon. Members, including my hon. Friend the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main), who made an excellent speech, have focused on the fact that people in the country are yearning for us to talk about something
other than Brexit and about the issues that matter to them. I am extremely fortunate to represent the wonderful constituency of Wantage and Didcot, which contributes an enormous amount to the British economy. It is a centre for scientific research, space companies and life sciences, and it has a Formula 1 team, Williams Formula 1. Understandably, the constituency voted to remain because those companies rely on the expertise of a workforce who are spread throughout Europe and who are able to come to this country to work. It is clear, therefore, that when we have this election—and we must have it—Brexit and the issues that emerge from it will be an important factor in the debate.

It is also right that when we call this election—I am speaking in support of the Bill—people should have the chance to debate issues such as who provides the best stewardship of the economy, healthcare and education as well as the importance of culture and the creative industries in our society, a subject very close to my heart.

I echo what the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley said—I hope this is in order, Mr Speaker—about the tone of any forthcoming general election campaign. You will be pleased to know that the insight I am about to deliver represents the conclusion of my remarks. When you quite rightly ruled me out of order for saying that I was going to make a pro-remain speech when in fact I am making a pro-election speech, the point I wanted to make was that, with a little bit of Brexit inside me—[Interruption.] My hon. Friend the Member for St Albans has perked up. Obviously, I do not want to be part of a European superstate. I often say to my remain friends that if at any point the European Union told us, “You can stay in the European Union only if you join the single currency,” I would be the first to man the barricades and call for Brexit—even, dare I say it, a no-deal Brexit.

What was left behind after the referendum, and what I hope we get back if we call an election, is an understanding of the role of this incredible institution of Parliament. We know that the people voted to leave the European Union, but the paranoid hard-right Brexiteers decided that any version of Brexit apart from their own would somehow snatch away their hard-won victory. However, you know, Mr Speaker, that the role of this place, as the Chamber of a representative democracy, is to take that instruction and to interpret it as best we can.

My rebellious streak emerged when a hard-line Brexit was proposed—the proposal to leave the customs union and the single market while maintaining an open border in Ireland is an impossible circle to square—and there were attacks on our judges, who were called “enemies of the people” for interpreting the law; attacks on business, which pays taxes and employs people; attacks on our civil servants, who worked day and night to deliver the instructions of their political masters; and, dare I say it, Mr Speaker, attacks on you for allowing us in this Chamber to have our say on important matters. What really drove me mad was the attempt by some people in this House to own the result of the referendum and say, to echo the words of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley, “My way or the highway,” trashing in the process every single institution that they purported to be campaigning for when they campaigned for Brexit.

That is utterly shameful. I hope they realise that everyone in this House has done their best to deliver on the referendum result.

It is not our fault that there was a hung Parliament. We can blame various people for the reason that we came back with a hung Parliament—[Interruption.] No, I blame the politicians. I blame the person who was leading our party at the last election when we could have come back with a majority, and this party can perhaps reflect on how long it took to react. Nobody knows how this election will turn out. I have simply taken a consistent position—as I have watched the carnage and the wreckage, and the ratcheting up of the rhetoric to “traitor” and “treason”—and said, “We should respect the referendum result, but we should leave with a deal.”

I do not know whether you and I will ever meet again in our respective positions, Mr Speaker. I simply want to say to you, as one man of average height—to echo my right hon. Friend the Member for Rayleigh and Wickford (Mr Francois)—but of substantial girth: thank you for everything that you have done to stand up for the rights of this Chamber. Thank you as well to all my colleagues, who I look forward to seeing on the election beat, reasonably exchanging sensible and intelligent views on the best way forward—

Sir Robert Syms (Poole) (Con) rose—

Mr Vaizey: I hope you do not mind if I take a small intervention, Mr Speaker.

Sir Robert Syms: It will be a small intervention, Mr Speaker. I do not wholly agree with my right hon. Friend, but this place would be poorer if he were not a Member of a future Parliament. I hope that he gets the Whip back and we can hear more brilliant speeches about science and all the other things that he has championed in this place.

Mr Vaizey: I am very grateful; my hon. Friend has been a wonderful colleague to me over many years. This place at its best is one of the best places to be—and at its worst, it is absolutely awful.

Mr Speaker: I appreciate the right hon. Gentleman’s very kind and gracious remarks, and I will not forget them.

I am afraid that to accommodate the remaining colleagues who are on the list, I will have to introduce a three-minute time limit with immediate effect—[Interruption.] Otherwise, people will not get in—I cannot help it, but there is injury time, as the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) knows.

5.16 pm

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): I will not be supporting a general election because I do not think that a general election will resolve Brexit. The clue is partly in the name: a “general” election is about general issues. It is impossible to extrapolate from the result what people think about a very specific issue—in this case, Brexit. If we want a specific answer on Brexit, we have to ask a specific question, and the best way of doing that is through a people’s vote. That is even more the case with an electoral system that is as undemocratic
and antiquated as ours, because first past the post regularly delivers majority Governments on a minority of votes.

A million people did not march through the streets of London a few weeks ago demanding a general election; they wanted a people’s vote because they know that is the best way—indeed, the only way—to get to the bottom of this crisis and resolve it. All that a general election will do, frankly, is put Nigel Farage and the Prime Minister back in their comfort zones, giving them a stage—political insiders dressed up as rebels, whose agenda, frankly, is chaos—so that division will thrive.

I want to take on the idea that this Parliament has run its course. The Prime Minister has won votes on both his Queen’s Speech and the Second Reading of the withdrawal agreement Bill. The only person who is blocking progress in this Parliament is the Prime Minister. The reason for that is very clear: he has an agenda that is all about a general election—about installing an even harder Vote Leave contingent of MPs in Parliament—but let us not allow him to get away with telling us as Parliament that somehow we have not been doing a good job of holding him to account. This is not a zombie Parliament; it is a Parliament that has got its head around parliamentary procedures in a way that any new Parliament will take months to do. It is precisely because we have been able to keep the Prime Minister in his box that he is not very happy with the fact that we are trying to continue on our way forward.

One of the reasons I do not want a general election right now is that the thing that should be front and centre of it—the climate emergency, which is what we should be debating in a general election—will be overshadowed by yet more fights about Brexit, which it will not resolve. We know that the next 18 months will be crucial in terms of whether we have a chance of getting off the collision course we are on with the climate catastrophe. The Committee on Climate Change said in its report to Parliament a few months ago that the next Parliament will be absolutely vital, so it is crucial that the next Parliament will take months to do. It is precisely because we have been able to keep the Prime Minister in his box that he is not very happy with the fact that we are trying to continue on our way forward.

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5.19 pm

Stephen Doughty (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): As I made clear earlier, there are issues relating to the franchise, conduct and security of any election that take place, but we do not have time to go into all those, so I will concentrate on the issue I have tabled two amendments on: votes at 16.

Votes at 16 could be done in a variety of ways without impediment, and I await the selection of amendments for the Committee stage. In my view, at the very least, 16 and 17-year-olds, and 18-year-olds who are obviously already on the register, should be able to vote. This step has been taken in Wales and Scotland. In my view, those who have the greatest stake in the future of our country—our young people—should be able to vote in this important general election, as they should in referendums, local elections and other such matters. I pay tribute to the work of my hon. Friends the Members for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), for Oldham West and Royton (Jim McMahon) and for Hove (Peter Kyle), who have pursued this issue strongly in the past.

Tim Loughton rose—

Stephen Doughty: I will not give way because of the time.

Tim Loughton: You will get extra time.

Stephen Doughty: I know, but I am conscious of other colleagues.

I pay tribute to all the organisations, particularly Members of the Youth Parliament, who have been making their voices heard and urging us to support the proposal and who want us to be able to debate this crucial amendment. Members of the Youth Parliament visited me in my own constituency a couple of weeks ago and reflected to me the issues that young people want discussed in this election. It is not just about Brexit, which I have spoken about many times—I am clear it will leave our country worse off, less safe and more unstable and I will continue to oppose it and to campaign for a people’s vote; it is about all the other issues that young people in my constituency come to talk to me about, including mental health, climate change, public services, opportunities for young people, tackling antisocial behaviour, violence and knife crime, and all the other issues. Our 16 and 17-year-olds care just as much about the future of our country as all the rest of my constituents do, and I will continue to stand up for them and all my constituents, young and old, in any election, but we need to be clear that that younger generation must have the vote in this general election.

5.22 pm

Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): My constituents and constituents across Scotland will have their say in a general election on the shambles they have seen unfolding over this Brexit farce. Scotland voted against Brexit—62%. Every single council area did so, but this Government and this Parliament ignored the Scottish Government’s compromise and ignored the Scottish Parliament, where every single party except the Tories voted to avoid this situation. The SNP wants to stop Brexit. We want to see the Prime Minister’s rotten deal go by the wayside.

More than that, since 2012, my constituency has been enduring the scandal of the universal credit roll-out to full service, which has brought misery to my constituents. The city used to have just one food bank; now there is one in every quarter of the city, thanks to the misery which universal credit is causing. My hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) has raised the issue of the rape clause in universal credit. I have urged three Prime Ministers now to listen to the Motor Neurone Disease Association, Marie Curie, Macmillan, patients, doctors and clinicians, to get rid of the six-month rule in universal credit for the terminally ill and to allow implicit consent, yet it has been ignored at every single stage. They all deserve their say on the Government’s failings. What have the Government got to fear from votes at 16? What do they have to fear from 16-year-olds?
[Drew Hendry]

They are about to inherit the farce that this place is laying down for them. EU nationals are also vital. In the highlands, they are vital for care, the NHS, tourism, hospitality and farming. These are our friends, neighbours and colleagues, and they should have the vote, as should 16 and 17-year-olds. Scotland does not want a Tory Government, and it especially does not want this Tory Government, who have failed my constituency and are failing Scotland. It cannot afford to be ignored any more.

A mandate exists for a referendum on independence for Scotland. We need to be in a position to give all our people in Scotland hope for the future and a choice between Boris island—this broken spectacle of Westminster little Britain under Brexit—and an independent Scotland taking its own seat at the heart of Europe.

5.24 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): I do not think that I will take my three minutes, Mr Speaker.

I do not fear an election, because I know the people in Motherwell and Wishaw well. I have been talking to them over the last few months, and the spirit of those people says that they are looking for independence. They want out of this cracked and broken Union. They want rid of this reckless Tory Government. They want the feeble Labour Opposition to stand up and fight against Tory austerity, Tory Brexit and the Tory mess that they have turned Scotland and the UK into over the last sixteen years.

Let us have an election. Let us find out what Scotland really wants. I know, but the rest of the UK should know: Scotland wants and needs independence, and independence soon.

5.25 pm

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): A Government under siege from its own side, ignoring the advice of its more thoughtful friends and fearful of a mythical force of ultra-patriots, prepared to do irreparable damage to the UK’s international relations by charging ahead with a reckless and ill-considered Brexit, is now desperate for an election to turn its huge opinion poll lead into a parliamentary majority.

So much for the May Government and the election of 2017. That Government impaled itself upon its own hubris—and who thought that history would repeat itself so quickly? The thinking of this Government has appeared to be, “We will burn that bridge when we come to it”, and the blame has always been someone else’s. A Prime Minister who bemoans his lack of control of Parliament while disposing of great chunks of his parliamentary party, and who struggles to win any vote in the Chamber, betrays a lack of leadership, a lack of control and a lack of statescraft. His premiership is defined now, and no election can save it. This is a make-do-and-mend, hand-me-down Government that will limp forlornly from here to its end and pass un lamented into history. The only question left is how much damage it will do as it dies.

An election now may not, of course, solve anything for the UK. It may return another deadlocked Parliament. There may be a small majority for one party or another, but there may well still be a deadlock in this strange malaise that has so paralysed the English body politic. You lot have no escape, sadly for the people whom you represent, but Scotland has. This election will demonstrate how the nations of the UK are diverging, and how Scotland is charting a different path. A nation that regards the EU as being generally a force for good, a nation that sees other nations as possible allies rather than probable enemies, a nation that looks outwards instead of up its own fundament. Scotland sits more and more uncomfortably with this place.

This election, when it comes, will lay the foundation for the independence that will follow. Scotland will walk a different path, and we will forge a different future. I pity the people of England who are so poorly served by their politicians, but England’s people have overturned broken systems in the past, and they can do so again. They can cast down the petty tribunes who have sat here for so long squabbling over trifles. This should be the last election to a UK Parliament: Scotland will be independent before another is due. We will have no need to die in a ditch; we will just get independence done without the buffoonery. No one can arrest the progress of a nation or shout down its ambition. This is the sunderance of the UK and the end of the song, and an auld song once ended in Scotland will start again.

Brexit has been the downfall of two Tory Prime Ministers and the decency of the Tory party, it has ripped apart the Labour party, and it has destroyed whatever credibility this Parliament once had.

5.28 pm

Geraint Davies (Swansea West) (Lab/Co-op): I am in favour of a general election: a general election on 7 May, when the sun is shining, when 16-year-olds are included, and when we can get over Brexit by having a bad referendum—a referend um on the deal. The Brexiters have been arguing for three years about what the deal should be, and now that we have a deal, we should put it to the people. Why are we not putting it to the people? Because the Prime Minister knows that people will not agree with it. There is a majority in the country in favour of remain, but he knows that he may get a majority of MPs, or a small minority of MPs if the remain vote splits. That is not democracy and, with his Brexit, and any Brexit, we will be poorer, weaker, more divided and isolated.

I very much regret that we are hurtling in this direction, thanks to the Liberal Democrats giving up the public vote and to the SNP: basically there is an unstoppable momentum towards an election. We will probably have an election now. The Labour party will be talking about a better Britain, a fairer Britain, a greener Britain, addressing climate change and not just Brexit, fundamentally giving that vote back to the people, so we are the party of democracy. The Tories will give Brexit at any cost. The Liberals will basically say “Remain whatever you think.” We will provide democracy, a better Britain and the fourth Prime Minister in four years with Jeremy Corbyn.

5.30 pm

Cat Smith (Lancaster and Fleetwood) (Lab): This Government are in complete disarray. After yesterday’s vote, we now have a Prime Minister who has suffered 10 embarrassing defeats in this House and two historic court rulings against him. He has shown his utter incompetence as Prime Minister.
Labour will put forward the most radical, hopeful, people-focused programme in modern times: a once-in-a-generation chance to rebuild and transform our country. We will put control of Brexit back in the hands of the people, with a real choice between a sensible leave deal or remain. Labour is the only party that can and will let the people decide on Brexit. We will tackle the climate emergency with a green new deal, bringing net zero emissions targets forward and providing renewable industries with the investment and support they need, including banning fracking in the UK once and for all. It is time for change. Labour will end austerity and build an economy that works for all, with a real living wage, proper collective bargaining and four new bank holidays. I look forward to making these positive arguments to the country in the weeks ahead.

5.35 pm

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Oliver Dowden): I should like to begin by paying tribute to all right hon. and hon. Members who have contributed to today’s debate and spoken with genuine sincerity and passion. There have been some excellent contributions, and a wide range of issues have been raised. Particularly, I would like to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely), my hon. Friend and neighbour the Member for St Albans (Mrs Main) and my hon. Friends the Members for Stone (Sir William Cash) and for Sleaford and North Hykeham (Dr Johnson). All those contributions made the same point: people want to get Brexit done. They want to move on, and the only way we can do that is to ensure that we have a general election mandating that that happens. In particular, I would like to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey)—sadly, he is not in his place—who gave a heartfelt and excellent speech paying tribute to this House.

I hope hon. Members appreciate that there will be further opportunities for discussion during the course of the Bill, particularly in the Committee stage that follows, so if they will forgive me, I will not go into detail on some of the points that I think will be addressed at that stage. What we really are facing today is the simplest possible Bill. It is a straightforward piece of legislation to allow a general election on 12 December so that we can elect a new Parliament, gets Brexit done and allow this country to finally move on. Let me be clear: the Government would rather be getting on with a smooth and orderly Brexit now.

Lady Hermon: I presume that as part of the Prime Minister’s general election campaign, he will make a grand tour of the United Kingdom, including Northern Ireland, so could the Minister just explain what the Prime Minister will say to the Unionist community there and how he will reassure them that their future is safe in his hands? I can assure the Minister that, at the present time, there are many in the Unionist community who do not feel confident that their future is safe in the Prime Minister’s hands.

Oliver Dowden: I thank the hon. Lady for her contribution. I do not know exactly where the Prime Minister will go on his election tour, but I am sure he will go to Northern Ireland. He will take the message to Northern Ireland that the deal that he has negotiated will allow the entire United Kingdom to leave the customs union as one and that that deal we based on a mechanism of consent.
The challenge that we have in getting such a deal through this House is that whenever Parliament has had the opportunity to get Brexit done, it has not taken it, even though 80% of us in this House stood on a mandate to honour the referendum result. Let us look at the record. Parliament voted to extend and delay in March, and to extend and delay in April. Through the Benn Act, Parliament forced the Prime Minister to extend beyond 31 October. Most recently, it voted against a timetable that would have allowed us to leave in an orderly manner, on time on 31 October, as we have promised. So I really fear that if Parliament has the choice of another delay or an extension beyond 31 January, it will surely once again take the opportunity to delay and to extend. The risk that we face is that, as we tick through to 2020, we once again find ourselves back in this Chamber discussing Brexit more and more, and that is completely contrary to what the public want. The public want us to get on with it and get Brexit done.

Jess Phillips: I wonder whether the Minister can tell me how we will stop the paralysis if what is returned to the House is exactly what we have now.

Oliver Dowden: I heard the hon. Lady make that point repeatedly throughout the debate. The very simple answer is that the people should vote Conservative and vote for a party that will get the deal through and ensure that we finally leave the European Union, as people want us to do.

Jess Phillips: Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

Oliver Dowden: I think that I have dealt with the hon. Lady’s point.

Thanks to the Prime Minister’s efforts, we have a deal that we will be putting to the British people at the general election, and we will then seek to deliver the deal through the House on the back of a stable and sustainable parliamentary majority that will finally allow us to leave the European Union, as most of us have promised to achieve.

Jim McMahon: Now that the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill has had its Second Reading, we should be using this time to take it to the next stage instead of calling an election.

Oliver Dowden: The problem with the argument advanced by the hon. Gentleman is that when we had the opportunity to get Brexit done and to get it done by 31 October, he and Opposition Members chose to vote against the programme motion that would have enabled that. The challenge facing us is that every time this House has had the opportunity to deliver on Brexit, it instead chooses further delay.

The deal that the Prime Minister has reached has confounded critics in this House and elsewhere. People said that we would never be able to reopen the withdrawal agreement, but we reopened it. He has nailed the naysayers who said that the EU would never let go of the Northern Ireland backstop by getting rid of the backstop. When people said that we could not ensure that the whole United Kingdom could leave as a single customs territory, he refused to accept it. This Government have made sure that the UK can leave the customs union as one entire United Kingdom that is free to chart its own course.

The Government’s position for some time has been that if Parliament cannot back the Prime Minister’s deal, we must surely have a general election. Up until today, however, that has not been the position of the Labour party. We have had the extraordinary spectacle of a Leader of the Opposition who spends every day castigating the Government’s failures—indeed, his party busily puts out leaflets demanding a general election—but when that golden moment arrives finally to have that general election, what happens? The Leader of the Opposition has repeatedly spurned it. I am glad that the Leader of the Opposition has finally faced up to the inevitable, ensuring that we will make some progress with this Bill. I am confident that we can make that progress, and that we can get on and have that general election.

When the general election happens, we will have two contrasting visions for 2020. The choice in front of the British people is clear. My right hon. Friend the Prime Minister has a deal that ensures that we deliver on the promises we made in the 2017 manifesto. We can finally deliver on Brexit and get the job done. Once we have got the job done, we can finally turn to the priorities that matter to the British people. The great one nation agenda being advanced by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister will allow us to deliver for our hospitals and for our schools.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Many excellent speeches were curtailed at three minutes this evening. Why is this awful, repetitious performance being allowed to go on for so long?

Mr Speaker: The Minister has two and a half minutes in which to develop his peroration, but the hon. Gentleman has registered his disapproval.

Oliver Dowden: Thank you for that opportunity, Mr Speaker, but I think I will be able to do so in slightly shorter order, so I hope that I can bring pleasure to the hon. Gentleman.

In the election, we will deliver on a one nation agenda: delivering for our schools and our hospitals, safer communities, more police, massive investment in our infrastructure, keeping our streets safe and tackling the cost of living. The alternative will be the nightmare advanced by the Leader of the Opposition, who wants to make 2020 the year of two referendums: one on Brexit and another on Scottish independence—more energy-sapping, mind-numbing stagnation and more pointless delay, so I urge right hon. and hon. Members to back this Bill and back the general election. Let the Government get Brexit done and allow the country to move on.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Committee of the whole House (Order, this day).

Mr Speaker: Under the Order of the House of today, we shall now—for which I may have to substitute “shortly”—move to a Committee of the whole House.
I say this as much for the benefit of people outside the elected Chamber as for anybody else. I have collected the voices, as the Speaker is required to do, and it is clear that there is an overwhelming majority in support of Second Reading. From Second Reading, we proceed to Committee. When the House sits in Committee, the Speaker does not occupy the Chair. That responsibility is taken by A. N. Other, who will be wending his or her way to the Chamber as I speak. I say with some confidence that another Chair will arrive ere long to take up his or her important duties.

Alison McGovern (Wirral South) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: I am deeply grateful to the hon. Lady, who may be indulged at slightly greater length than would otherwise be the case.

Alison McGovern: This has been a fractious, challenging, controversial and difficult debate at times. Do you agree, Mr Speaker, that in the context of this debate, it is extraordinarily important that all Members agree that their behaviour, whether in this House or in the potential general election to come, should be exemplary, whatever others do?

Mr Speaker: I agree. On the matter of exemplary behaviour, we can all learn from the hon. Lady. I know she did not seek that tribute, but I proffer it gratis in any case, because it has the advantage of being justified.
different kind of country: a country where people get the care they need, from a properly funded NHS; a country where everyone, regardless of their family background, gets the education they need to do well in life; a country where regions that have been held back get the investment they need and a chance to rebuild after a decade of neglect; a country where homelessness is a thing of the past, and everyone can access safe and affordable housing; and a country that is led by a Prime Minister that puts the control of Brexit back in the hands of people in a new referendum, with a real choice between a leave deal and remain.

Labour is the only party that can, and will, let the people decide on Brexit. This is a once-in-a-generation chance to rebuild and transform our country, which is why I urge this House to support this amendment, to ensure that this election is as accessible as possible.

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Oliver Dowden): It is a pleasure to speak in Committee on this crucial Bill. As I said in my closing remarks on Second Reading, this is a short, sensible Bill, setting out the date of the next general election. The Bill provides transparency on the date of an election and ensures that it can be conducted in a timely way so that Parliament can meet in good time ahead of the 31 January deadline.

Clause 1 provides for a parliamentary general election to be held on 12 December 2019. I will shortly set out why that is the preferred date and why the Government will resist the Opposition amendment.

Clause 2 deals with the Bill’s short title and provides that the Bill will come “into force on the day it is passed.”

I wish briefly to touch on the subsections in clause 1, to provide reassurance to Members; these are minor, technical points. Subsection (3)(a) removes the requirement for Ministers to review the welfare cap in the current Parliament. Subsection (3)(b) ensures that the reporting requirement placed on Ministers does not need to be completed in this Parliament. Both measures ensure that these requirements will align with the new parliamentary Session, following the election.

On the principal amendment standing in the name of the Opposition, we have considered the date of the poll and I wish to set out why 12 December is the best date, for two reasons. First, it gives Parliament enough time to progress essential business—specifically, the Northern Ireland Budget Bill, which is necessary to access the funding that the Northern Ireland civil service needs after 31 October. If that Bill does not receive Royal Assent, the delivery of public services and proper governance in Northern Ireland would be put at risk.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald (Glasgow South) (SNP): But would that issue not be resolved by a sitting this Friday?

Oliver Dowden: It would be helpful for this House to consider that Bill in good order, as it is an important measure to ensure that nurses, teachers and police officers in Northern Ireland get paid. If we do not pass that legislation, there is a real danger that such people will not get paid. I urge hon. Members to think carefully about moving the date. The issue at hand is whether to move the date to 9 December, which would preclude our passing that Bill.

Mrs Anne Main (St Albans) (Con): Did my hon. Friend note that the Opposition spokesperson’s principal reason for opting for 9 December and not 12 December was that they felt that students would somehow miss out? Students are perfectly able to apply for a postal vote or a proxy vote, and three days will make absolutely no difference to that process.

Oliver Dowden: Yes, my hon. Friend and neighbour, who represents St Albans, raises an important point: there is no substance to the point about students being disfranchised. That is because, first, 70% of students choose to vote at their home address, so this would not apply to them; and, secondly, because all the 40 largest universities will be sitting on 12 December. So I do not believe there is any danger of disfranchising.

Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): I remember the leader of the Scottish National party saying last Thursday that we could not have an election on 12 December because it would be cold, dark and wet. Has my hon. Friend been in touch with the Met Office to find out how much warmer and how much lighter it will be three days earlier on 9 December?

Oliver Dowden: I stand ready to be corrected, but I did look that up. I believe that having the election three days earlier would allow one whole minute of extra daylight.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): It does not matter in the Humber if it is 9 or 12 December—I can guarantee it will be a bit windy and probably a bit damp. More importantly, will the Minister dismiss the Opposition’s amendment for what it is—a shameful attempt to divide? That is what it is about. The Opposition are trying to build resentment in a group of the electorate that they think are susceptible to their message. It is disgraceful and shameful to try to separate students from the rest of the population, when everyone knows that people can vote by post and by proxy in every election. The Opposition will divide, divide, divide throughout the election campaign, because that is what they do.

Oliver Dowden: As ever, my hon. Friend is entirely correct. There will be no impact on the enfranchisement of students. All students will have the opportunity to vote. Most vote at home. Most universities will still be sitting.

Several hon. Members rose—

Oliver Dowden: If hon. Members will allow me to elucidate on this point, it may satisfy them. The other reason to have an election on 12 December is that it is a Thursday. By convention, Thursday is the day on which we have such elections in this country. There does not seem to be a strong argument to the contrary to move it those few days earlier.

Stewart Malcolm McDonald: I point out to the Minister that there is no convention to have elections every two years, but we seem to be content to do that.
I want to take the Minister back to his important points on the Northern Ireland Budget Bill. We all want to see people get paid—we do not want a Republican-style shutdown of government in Northern Ireland—so will he answer the question I asked? Could we not resolve this dispute by sitting this Friday?

**Oliver Dowden:** I again make three points to the hon. Gentleman. First, Thursday is the usual date for such an election. Why change it? I have yet to hear an argument advanced to change it—the hon. Gentleman is essentially making a case to change it from Thursday to Monday. Secondly, we need to have time properly to consider the Northern Ireland Budget Bill. Thirdly, if hon. Members wish to move the election to the earlier date, they need to come up with a compelling reason to do so, other than daylight, which I have yet to hear.

**Stewart Malcolm McDonald:** Will the Minister give way?

**Neil Gray (Airdrie and Shotts) (SNP):** Will the Minister give way?

**Oliver Dowden:** I think I have dealt with this point.

**The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. We cannot have everybody on their feet at the same time. It is for the Minister to give way.

**Oliver Dowden:** I will make some progress and then I will consider giving way.

There are principled reasons why we wish to have proper scrutiny of legislation for the Northern Ireland budget. It is essential for teachers, doctors and nurses in Northern Ireland to be paid. There is a convention that elections are held on Thursday. Once again, the Opposition are trying to move the goalposts. Initially, the argument was that they did not want a general election on 12 December because they were concerned that the Government would somehow seek to ram through the Bill giving effect to the Prime Minister’s deal. Yesterday, at the Dispatch Box, the Prime Minister give an assurance on that. Now, they seek to contrive another reason artificially to create divisions in this House over moving the date by three days.

We have had three years to consider this matter. Will three days really make that much difference? That is in tune with a wider point. The public are getting more and more frustrated at this House endlessly coming up with procedural reasons that prevent us from getting on and doing the thing we want to do, as set out in this Bill—to have a general election to allow us to resolve the issue. We will resist the Opposition amendment to move the date of the general election.

**Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab):** This is just a technical question. If the general election is on 12 December, when will the new Parliament sit and when will we have a Queen’s Speech? When this was last done in 1923-24, with the general election on 6 December, the Queen’s Speech was not until 15 January, which would make it difficult to get any serious business done by the end of January.

**Oliver Dowden:** I hope I can reassure the hon. Gentleman. The reason the Government wish to have a general election is to ensure that we have a sustainable majority to pass the Bill that implements the Prime Minister’s withdrawal agreement. Therefore, the impetus on us is to get that done as quickly as possible. I do not think that he will find delays from those of us on the Government Benches.

6 pm

I wish briefly to touch on amendment 14 that stands in my name. The Scottish National party has raised a concern that the amendment seeks to address. Its concern was to ensure that the registration deadline in Scotland for a 12 December election was the same as for the rest of the country. The Government support the intention of the SNP amendment in relation to this election to ensure that we have an across-UK approach to the registration deadline. This will allow a comprehensive UK-wide communication campaign by the Electoral Commission to advertise a deadline and to ensure that those who want to register are able to do so in a timely manner. The Government’s amendment would achieve the consistency in registration deadlines that the right hon. Member for Ross, Skye and Lochaber (Ian Blackford) and his party desired without any longer term, unintended consequences.

**Neil Gray:** I thank the Minister for giving way. I think that it is clear that the contentious area in this part of the discussion is about whether the election is on 9 or 12 December. No. 10 had previously suggested that it is willing to pull the Bill if the amendments regarding EU nationals and 16 and 17-year-old are selected and passed, so my question to the Minister is this: are the Government willing to die in a ditch over whether the election is on 9 or 12 December? What is their intention if this amendment passes?

**Oliver Dowden:** I believe that I have set out two sensible and compelling reasons to have the date on 12 December, and I have yet to hear to the contrary an argument about why we need to move it by three days. I really think that we have dealt with this point. I know other hon. Members wish to speak, so if the Committee will forgive me I will conclude my points on amendment 14, which stands in my name.

The Government’s amendment removes St Andrew’s day 2019 only from the operation of regulation 29(4) and 8(3) of the Representation of the People (Scotland) Regulations. This both restricts the change to this election only and leaves the subsequent register intact. The effect of the amendment is to remove the bank holiday from the calculation of time for registering for the voter deadline. It would instead be classed as a normal working day, but for this election only. We feel that the amendment, as we have drafted it, will, I hope, address SNP concerns, but will limit any unintended consequences of amending the relevant provision of the regulations.

In summary, we are trying to achieve straightforward, simple legislation that ensures that we can have a general election in short order. I urge all hon. Members to resist the temptation to complicate and amend this to allow us to have the general election on 12 December so that we can get a sustainable majority to deliver the Prime Minister’s deal and finally move on.

**Tommy Sheppard (Edinburgh East) (SNP):** I want to make some comments generally on the Bill as a whole and then to discuss the individual amendments that have been selected.
I must start by saying that, clearly, it is not ideal for anyone to have an election a couple of weeks before Christmas: the nights are fair drawing in, it will be cold and dark, and many of the people in this country will, quite understandably, be looking forward to Christmas and spending time with their family and relatives. So it is hardly an ideal time, but from our perspective in the SNP, we think that this is a necessary requirement now, because we have reached a situation of impasse in this Parliament where it is incapable of resolving probably the biggest political issue that has divided the United Kingdom in my lifetime. There are competing views as to what the end point of the Brexit process should be, and parliamentary democracy in this country, it seems to me, has now reached a point of stasis where it is incapable of adjudicating between those outcomes. It is therefore right and proper that we should go back to the electorate and allow them to reflect on what can happen.

This will very much be the Brexit election. I am pleased that we have moved the Government from their position a few weeks ago, when they did not actually want a Brexit election in which the people would be allowed to cast their views about different outcomes. They wanted to get Brexit done and go to the electorate afterwards. That would have been a travesty because it would have said to the people, “We’re going to have a general election on Brexit will be one of the big topics of conversation, but there is really no point in you expressing a view, because we’re going to conclude the matter before the first ballot is cast.” That would have been a ridiculous and anti-democratic situation. I am glad that we have moved the Prime Minister and the Government away from that approach, even if it does mean that the Prime Minister might be looking for a ditch on Thursday.

Many people have lamented the fact that Parliament has not resolved this matter, three and a half years on. In my view, that is simply because it is without any reasonable resolution. The promise of Brexit has turned out to be a lie. In 2016, people were told that they could vote to leave the European Union and would be better off as a result. That is not true, and hardly anyone in this Chamber would now argue that it was. In fact, it is a matter of how bad the different Brexit options are. That is why, quite understandably, there is now a large body of opinion in this country for whom the conclusion of this process should be to say, “That’s it. It has gone far enough. Stop it now; we want to get off.” An election will allow that view to come to the fore.

The election will also allow the Prime Minister to put his deal before the electorate. And hon. Members should be under no illusions—the Prime Minister has taken an extremely flawed deal by his predecessor and made it immeasurably worse. This series of proposals that the Prime Minister has agreed with the European Union will impoverish people in this country, very much remove the standing of the United Kingdom in the eyes of the world and leave it a much worse place. I do not want that for the people of England, Wales and Northern Ireland, and I certainly do not want that outcome for the people of Scotland. That is why it is right and proper that the Prime Minister should put his case before the electorate. I look forward to him being challenged—not just by Opposition parties, but by Nigel Farage so that we can see whether the deal he has come up with satisfies the real hard-right Brexiteers, for whom nothing will sate their appetite.

As many people have remarked, the situation in Scotland is quite different; 62% of the people of Scotland did not vote for this mess. Had teenage voters and most people in Scotland born elsewhere in the European Union been allowed to take part in that decision, the figure would have been far higher still, as it would if the question were asked again today. It is my responsibility to represent the people who elected me.

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): On the issue of votes for 16 and 17-year-olds, I believe that all men and women are born equal and that everybody in this place should be equal. Amendment 10, which fortunately was not selected today, would have given 16 and 17-year-olds in Scotland and Wales the vote, but—

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. The hon. Lady is out of order; amendment 10 is not debatable.

Tommy Sheppard: I am confused as to why that particular intervention should have been made at this point in my speech, but I will mention the issue when I come to consider the amendments before us.

I think it was the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips) who said that the outcome of an election could be another hung Parliament, without a majority one way or the other. That, of course, is true. But an election will allow us all the opportunity to refresh a mandate. I for one believe that there are far too many people in this Parliament who are imprisoned by an out-of-date mandate from 2017 that is against what they would do now, having considered the matter. It will give colleagues, particularly those in Her Majesty’s Opposition in seats where a majority voted to leave the European Union, the opportunity to go there and argue, if they so wish, for a rethink and for this matter to be put back to the public before any final decision is taken. That mandate was not present in this Parliament; it could be present in a new Parliament. That is another reason why an election would be welcome.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): It is a fact that in the 2016 referendum electoral offences were committed by Vote Leave—the campaign that the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and their chief adviser were actually involved in. Is not this general election an opportunity to highlight their role and for a new Government to investigate that properly—something that has not been done under this Government?

Tommy Sheppard: Indeed, there would be the opportunity to do that. Those transgressions should be investigated and they do undermine the result of the 2016 referendum. That is yet another reason why the electorate should be allowed to look at this matter again.

I want to be very clear that with regard to mandates in Scotland, we will be fighting this general election with three objectives: first, to stop Brexit, not to rubber stamp it; secondly, to get rid of the most right-wing Tory Government in my lifetime; and thirdly, to demand that people in Scotland have the right to choose an alternative future—an alternative path for doing things—
and should not be dragged along against their will. We will put that case to the people of Scotland, and if we win that mandate and win that election, then I demand that other people in this Chamber respect that decision and do not stand in the way of the people of Scotland when they next seek the opportunity to determine their own method of governance.

Let me turn, in closing, to the amendments. I will not discuss amendments that have not been selected, but I simply say that it is a matter of regret that, at this time of political crisis when we are discussing how to get out of it, we are not able to seize the opportunity to extend our franchise and allow two very important groups of people in our community who have a vested interest in the outcome of this decision—more than we do—the opportunity to participate.

**David Duguid** (Banff and Buchan) (Con): On voting age, I wonder whether the hon. Gentleman appreciates—I am sure he does—that those who were 17-year-olds in 2016 were 18-year-olds and of voting age in 2017, when 56% of voters in Scotland voted for either the Conservative party or Labour, both of which, if only at the time in the case of Labour, were committed to delivering Brexit.

**Tommy Sheppard:** I am unclear that that is an argument against 16 and 17-year-olds being able to vote in this election or, indeed, in any subsequent election.

**Stephen Doughty** (Cardiff South and Penarth) (Lab/Co-op): I entirely concur with the hon. Gentleman’s point; indeed, I made it more widely on Second Reading. It is a shame that we are not doing this—although obviously we are not able to discuss amendments that have not been selected.

**Tommy Sheppard:** I thank the hon. Gentleman. I think there is actually a broad level of agreement among Members across the House, including the odd one over on the Conservative Benches as well, that the time has surely come to extend the franchise. I hope we do not end up in a situation where we have a general election in December and it will be another five years before we can even consider this possible enfranchisement. It would therefore have been a timely opportunity to seize the issue, but we have chosen not to do so.

On the amendments that have been selected, we are very much in favour of the one suggesting that the election should move to 9 December, and we shall vote for it tonight. The Government said that they wanted an election as soon as possible, so why would they not wish to have it three days earlier than the date—

**Sir Hugo Swire** (East Devon) (Con) rose—

**Tommy Sheppard:** I think I have taken enough interventions, in fairness—I need to conclude.

**Sir Hugo Swire** rose—

**Tommy Sheppard:** No, thank you. [Interruption.] No, thank you. Which part of “no” don’t you understand?

A 9 December election brings a number of benefits. It enables more of the electorate to participate and it puts an extra little bit of distance between the election and Christmas. Furthermore, it does not inconvenience our ability to conclude our business in this Parliament in any way. We could get our business finished and have Dissolution at the end of this week, so it is entirely doable. I do not understand why the Government, who have been so determined that there must be an election as soon as possible, are so resistant to doing it three days earlier. Let us do it as soon as possible, in order to get this lot out as soon as possible.

6.15 pm

Finally, and uncharacteristically, I would like to thank the Government for their technical amendment, which simply eradicates the disadvantage that there would be in the electoral registration process in Scotland, occasioned by the fact that we have a bank holiday on 30 November for St Andrew’s day. I hope that the Committee will pass the amendment and put us all on a level playing field. With that, I shall conclude my remarks and look forward to the general election to come.

**Sir Hugo Swire:** On the last point made by the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), I should declare an interest: St Andrew’s day will also be the day of my 60th birthday.

By 30 November, I shall no longer be a Member of Parliament, because I am not standing at the forthcoming election. I have been here since 2001, and I have to say that the last few years have not been Parliament at its best. It would be difficult to find a rare statement made by any one of us over the past two years. It has been like groundhog day every day, and the public are getting extremely fed up with our behaviour. In fact, I have never known such a disconnect between the body politic and the public, and I believe that any device or attempt to frustrate our having a general election now will be viewed extremely badly by the public, who, as I say, are extremely fed up with our behaviour.

We all understand why the Scottish nationalist party wants to have an election—because it knows that the court case starting in January will lay bare the divisions between those who support Alex Salmond and those who support Nicola Sturgeon. SNP Members know that if the election is delayed until next year, they will suffer at the polls. It is strange for a party that prides itself on looking after one of the devolved parts of the United Kingdom to play party politics with Northern Ireland. [Interruption.] The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry) laughs in rather a tinny way.

**David Linden:** Will the right hon. Gentleman give way?

**Sir Hugo Swire:** No, I will not give way. As a former Minister of State for Northern Ireland, which I do not believe the hon. Member for Glasgow East (David Linden) is, I care passionately about Northern Ireland, and I am concerned about some aspects of how the proposed legislation affects Northern Ireland. That said, it is my understanding that if the date of the election is brought forward, that will prevent much of the legislation we need to empower the civil service in Northern Ireland to do their job. Why are the Scottish Nats prepared to play politics, and to what end, with the people of Northern Ireland if they care about Northern Ireland, or perhaps they wish to cast them to one side?

I am extremely glad and relieved that the wrecking amendments have not been selected, such as the one giving EU nationals the right to vote in British elections.
I ask again: where can British citizens vote in national elections in the EU? The answer is nowhere. In terms of the sudden discovery that votes should be given to 16-year-olds as a matter of course, everybody realises that that cannot be done in the timetable available; it is another wrecking amendment.

The British people are watching our deliberations this evening. They want an election. They understand that the date for the election is partially informed by the desire to have good governance and good government for the people of Northern Ireland. It is worth remembering that the institutions are not up and running there. It would be foolhardy to bring the election forward by a matter of days and frustrate that, and therefore amendment 2 should be resisted.

**Andrew Percy:** My intervention was somewhat long, so I thought I would make a speech to make a small contribution to this debate.

I absolutely welcome the fact that we are going to have a general election. It is a sadness, in a way, that this Parliament has not been able to run its full term, particularly given that the last one also ran for only two years. This Parliament has not been able to run its full term because, very sadly, people in this place did not do what they said they were going to do in the 2017 election, which was to honour the referendum result.

We have heard some of that in some of the speeches this afternoon. What has gone on since that election in 2017, in which the overwhelming majority of us were re-elected to deliver Brexit? I accept that the SNP Members had a different position, and they have consistently followed the line they took in the general election, but that is not the case for most of the rest of us. What has happened is that we have seen the belittling of the referendum result and talking down to the people who happened is that we have seen the belittling of the referendum result and talking down to the people who voted to leave the European Union.

We have heard some of that again today. Indeed, the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (SNP), dared to vote to leave the European Union. What has gone on since that election in 2017, in which was to honour the referendum result.

We have heard some of that in some of the speeches this afternoon. What has gone on since that election in 2017, in which the overwhelming majority of us were re-elected to deliver Brexit? I accept that the SNP Members had a different position, and they have consistently followed the line they took in the general election, but that is not the case for most of the rest of us. What has happened is that we have seen the belittling of the referendum result and talking down to the people who dared to vote to leave the European Union.

We have heard some of that again today. Indeed, the contribution of the SNP spokesman, the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), did the same, implying that Brexiteers and people who voted leave did not really know what they were voting for.

**Patricia Gibson** (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Andrew Percy:** No, I am in the middle of this point.

**Tommy Sheppard** rose—

**Andrew Percy:** If the hon. Gentleman will give me a moment to let me finish my point, I will then give way to him.

We have seen consistently throughout that people who did not vote for Brexit and are on the other side of the debate consistently tell Brexit voters what it is that we voted for, and they think they have the right to interpret what—

**The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Lindsay Hoyle):** Order. No, it is not a debate about Brexit; it is debate about the clauses and amendments. Unfortunately, the hon. Gentleman is trying to widen the debate from where we are. We are on the clauses and amendments. Has the hon. Gentleman now finished?

**Andrew Percy:** I will now give way to the hon. Gentleman.

**The Chairman:** Right, but let us stick to where we are.

**Andrew Percy:** I am responding to a speech made in the Chamber, Sir Lindsay, and directly to a point that was made.

**Tommy Sheppard:** I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman for giving way because I just want to clarify this on the record. At no time has any of us ever said that people did not know what they were voting for in the Brexit referendum in 2016. What we do say is that they were wilfully lied to in that campaign.

**Andrew Percy:** That is exactly the point. It is saying that the people who voted remain knew full well what they were doing, but Brexit voters were misled, they were a bit daft, they were lied to and, uniquely, they could not see through it.

**Patricia Gibson:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

**Andrew Percy:** No, I will not give way to the hon. Lady.

Some want to talk about promises made in a referendum campaign about whether people would be poorer or richer afterwards, but I am afraid we will take no lectures from the SNP on this matter.

**Bill Grant** (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): We hear what it believes to be the voice of Scotland, but the SNP is the voice of some of Scotland. What SNP Members do not often say is that more people voted in Scotland to leave the European Union in 2016 than voted for the SNP at the general election in 2017—and that is a fact. A lot of people in Scotland voted to leave the European Union.

**Andrew Percy:** Indeed, that is absolutely true, but, as I have said, in fairness to SNP Members, their position on wanting to cancel Brexit is at least a consistent one, and one on which they stood in the 2017 general election.

We also heard this in the intervention by the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas), who again suggested that there was some sort of fiddling in favour of leave. This is why this Parliament is so broken, and why this Parliament is—

**Ian C. Lucas**—

**Andrew Percy:** No, I am not giving way because I have not finished my point. All I would say to the hon. Gentleman is that, after the 2015 election, his party was fined for election expense failings—I think over the Ed stone, as it was called—and Momentum received the biggest fine that any political group has received in the UK. I do not question the hon. Gentleman’s mandate from either the 2015 election or from 2017 because his party was responsible in one election for technical breaches when it came to expenses law, or, in the case of the 2017 election, because one of the groups within his party—

**Ian C. Lucas**—

**Andrew Percy:** Will the hon. Gentleman give way?
Ian C. Lucas: We are talking not about technical breaches, but about collusion to break electoral spending limits; collusion in which the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Dominic Cummings were involved. That is important. I voted for article 50 and I was misled by a campaign that I found out about after I had voted. I take that seriously. Clearly, the hon. Gentleman does not. I believe in keeping the law.

Andrew Percy: I am sorry, but the hon. Gentleman has done nothing to deliver on his 2017 election manifesto since that vote, which was to deliver Brexit. It is a prime example of why this Parliament is so broken. Never mind the £1 million that was funnelled to various remain groups towards the end of the referendum campaign; never mind the millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money used to campaign for remain; never mind all the institutions of the state that were used—

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): On a point of order, Sir Lindsay.

The Chairman: Order. You are a former member of the Panel of Chairs. You know exactly what I am relating my comments to. We have allowed a little movement away from the clause and the amendment. You have answered the question at least five times already, Mr Percy, and I would love to hear from Michael Tomlinson who is next to you. He is desperate to get in.

Andrew Percy: We have two hours for this debate, so I hope we will get to hear other Members.

The Chairman: Order. You are a former member of the Panel of Chairs. You know exactly what I am relating my comments to. We have allowed a little movement away from the clause and the amendment, and I now want you to speak about them. If not, other Members wish to speak.

Andrew Percy: I am responding to points that were made in other speeches and interventions in the debate, but I will of course—[Interruption.] Opposition Front Benchers need to calm themselves. I know they are not worried about voters being confused about an election or unable to vote, changing the day is one way in which people could be confused. We have always voted—I do not know for how long, but certainly in my short years on this planet—on a Thursday. A change in the day could be confusing. If we have to vote on 9 December, so be it, but 12 December should be the date because Thursday is the day we normally vote.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Percy: No, I will not give way any more.

I want to make a final point about the tone of the forthcoming general election campaign because it will be important. We have heard a lot of attacks on the Prime Minister in the last few days in the Chamber. An analysis out today said that the person who has been on the receiving end of the largest amount of bile and personal attacks is the Prime Minister. We will see more of that in the election campaign.

The 2017 general election campaign was the worst I have ever been involved in when it came to behaviour. I have fought eight election campaigns in my short life. As the Leader of the Opposition is here, I hope he will reflect on the words he uses in the campaign. What happened at the last election was in his name. My staff were spat at in his name and I was attacked in the street by people chanting his name at me on his behalf because of the divisive language he consistently used in the run-up to that election. I will take him at his word that in this election he will encourage his supporters and party members to engage in better behaviour. The 2017 election was, for many of us, an appalling campaign to go through, with abuse, threats, damage to property and damage to constituents’ property perpetrated, in some cases, in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. I hope the campaign in December is a more civil one on all sides. This is not a matter that one side owns. I hope we will all conduct ourselves somewhat better in the forthcoming election.

I am afraid we have been let down by their Members of Parliament who have not kept their promises from the 2017 election—all the constituencies around me voted by a huge margin to leave the European Union—to have a say for exactly the reason that my hon. Friend stated.

This Parliament has not kept its promises to the people. I am not especially bothered about whether it is 9 or 12 December. All I would say is that if we are worried about voters being confused about an election or unable to vote, changing the day is one way in which people could be confused. We have always voted—I do not know for how long, but certainly in my short years on this planet—on a Thursday. A change in the day could be confusing. If we have to vote on 9 December, so be it, but 12 December should be the date because Thursday is the day we normally vote.

Ian C. Lucas: We are talking not about technical breaches, but about collusion to break electoral spending limits; collusion in which the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and Dominic Cummings were involved. That is important. I voted for article 50 and I was misled by a campaign that I found out about after I had voted. I take that seriously. Clearly, the hon. Gentleman does not. I believe in keeping the law.

Andrew Percy: I am sorry, but the hon. Gentleman has done nothing to deliver on his 2017 election manifesto since that vote, which was to deliver Brexit. It is a prime example of why this Parliament is so broken. Never mind the £1 million that was funnelled to various remain groups towards the end of the referendum campaign; never mind the millions of pounds of taxpayers’ money used to campaign for remain; never mind all the institutions of the state that were used—

David Linden (Glasgow East) (SNP): On a point of order, Sir Lindsay.

The Chairman: Order. You are a former member of the Panel of Chairs. You know exactly what I am relating my comments to. We have allowed a little movement away from the clause and the amendment. You have answered the question at least five times already, Mr Percy, and I would love to hear from Michael Tomlinson who is next to you. He is desperate to get in.

Andrew Percy: We have two hours for this debate, so I hope we will get to hear other Members.

The Chairman: Order. You are a former member of the Panel of Chairs. You know exactly what I am relating my comments to. We have allowed a little movement away from the clause and the amendment, and I now want you to speak about them. If not, other Members wish to speak.

Andrew Percy: I am responding to points that were made in other speeches and interventions in the debate, but I will of course—[Interruption.] Opposition Front Benchers need to calm themselves. I know they are not worried about voters being confused about an election or unable to vote, changing the day is one way in which people could be confused. We have always voted—I do not know for how long, but certainly in my short years on this planet—on a Thursday. A change in the day could be confusing. If we have to vote on 9 December, so be it, but 12 December should be the date because Thursday is the day we normally vote.

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Andrew Percy: No, I will not give way any more.

I want to make a final point about the tone of the forthcoming general election campaign because it will be important. We have heard a lot of attacks on the Prime Minister in the last few days in the Chamber. An analysis out today said that the person who has been on the receiving end of the largest amount of bile and personal attacks is the Prime Minister. We will see more of that in the election campaign.

The 2017 general election campaign was the worst I have ever been involved in when it came to behaviour. I have fought eight election campaigns in my short life. As the Leader of the Opposition is here, I hope he will reflect on the words he uses in the campaign. What happened at the last election was in his name. My staff were spat at in his name and I was attacked in the street by people chanting his name at me on his behalf because of the divisive language he consistently used in the run-up to that election. I will take him at his word that in this election he will encourage his supporters and party members to engage in better behaviour. The 2017 election was, for many of us, an appalling campaign to go through, with abuse, threats, damage to property and damage to constituents’ property perpetrated, in some cases, in the name of the Leader of the Opposition. I hope the campaign in December is a more civil one on all sides. This is not a matter that one side owns. I hope we will all conduct ourselves somewhat better in the forthcoming election.

6.30 pm

I will conclude, but I have to say that I will oppose the 9 December amendment. If we end up with 9 December so be it, but it is so much better if we stick to the tradition of always voting on a Thursday, which is something that constituents very clearly understand.

Michael Tomlinson (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): I am going to make a change in tack from the previous three speakers and actually speak to some of the amendments that have been tabled. However, I first want to pick up on the really important point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole (Andrew Percy) at the end of his speech. We all heard about a “kinder, gentler politics”. I entirely agree with my hon. Friend and, like him, I look forward to fighting a positive campaign on the issues, seeing that kinder,
gentler politics on the doorsteps and in the conduct of each of us. Perhaps that is a pledge that we can each make right here and right now.

I am also following the contribution from my right hon. Friend the Member for East Devon (Sir Hugo Swire). It was a great pleasure to hear him speak. I hope he heard the cheers from the Back Benches, effectively crying for more. We cannot believe that he is retiring at such a young age and that this House will be deprived of his voice in future Parliaments. I say that with all sincerity. It was a great pleasure to hear him make a small contribution to this particular debate, following such a distinguished career in this place. It has been a great pleasure working alongside him in a number of campaigns.

I join the hon. Member for Edinburgh East (Tommy Sheppard), who I think welcomed, very briefly, the technical amendment tabled in the name of my right hon. Friend the Minister. I, too, welcome that technical amendment and will be supporting it. I hope it will not be pressed to a Division.

I want to turn to amendment 2, which relates to the date of the election. We eventually heard the hon. Gentleman, after a 10-minute speech, turn to the clauses and the amendment. He gave what I thought were rather weak reasons for why he preferred 9 December to 12 December. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole, I am perfectly prepared to fight an election on a Monday as much as a Thursday, but it seems to me that that is perhaps not the key point.

There are two key reasons why 12 December is to be preferred. The first is in relation to Northern Ireland business. It is incredibly important that the Northern Ireland Executive budget can complete its stages, so that the civil service can be in good shape and ensure that nurses, doctors and teachers are paid.

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): I was listening very carefully to the speech my hon. Friend is referring to and I was struck that there was no real explanation why it makes a difference where a student casts their vote, whether at home or at university. They can do a postal vote if necessary.

Michael Tomlinson: I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend. Evidence shows that 70% of students cast their vote in their hometown in any event. It seems to me to make no difference whether it is during term time or not. In fact, that seems to miss the point. Most terms end on 13 December, not on 12 or 9 December. Most close on either 13 December or the week after. Therefore, this wheeze—it does seem to be a wheeze and a point of division, as my hon. Friend the Member for Brigg and Goole said—does not even work at face value, because students will still be in place on 12 December.

Ian Mearns: As a school governor, I know about the disruption caused to schools used as polling stations on a Thursday. If the school has to close, that often means that children will miss not only the Thursday but the Friday, because parents will keep them off for an extended weekend. That situation would be circumvented if the poll took place on a Monday, because parents would bring their children in from Tuesday to Friday.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): On the issue of access to polling stations, my hon. Friend may wish to consider the fact that my electoral registration officers in Suffolk tell me that it is particularly challenging to get access on a Sunday to village halls and many of the other places where votes will take place on a Monday. Will he reflect on that, the importance of holding the election on a later day in the week, and the need to stick with Thursdays, which is the convention?

Michael Tomlinson: I am very grateful to my hon. Friend for his intervention, because I had not considered that point before. It is a live issue, given that polling stations have to open early in the morning. In Dorset as much as Suffolk, who is going to hand over the key to the village hall? When will it be collected? There are practicalities involved. He has made a powerful point and given a third reason, in addition to my previous two, why Thursday should be preferred to Monday.
Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): My hon. Friend is making some important points. I reiterate the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter). The halls would need to be prepared on a Sunday for a Monday, and we would also potentially have to pay double time for wages, which would involve extra expense. Frankly, however, we should not be using schools as polling stations. We should not be interfering with children’s education. Some years ago, my constituency gave up using schools and found alternatives. The most popular polling station we now use is in a pub. There are alternatives that do not deny children their education, whether on a Monday or a Thursday.

Michael Tomlinson: The pub is the hub—I have heard that somewhere before—and why should not it be used as a polling station? I often hold surgeries in different pubs across the constituency of Mid Dorset and North Poole. It seems to me that that is a perfectly reasonable place to hold them.

Concerns have been expressed on Mumsnet that nativity plays and the like may be interfered with. If that can be avoided, I would certainly support that.

Ian Mearns: I would be very happy to vote in a pub, but many of my neighbours from the Orthodox Jewish community might not be. We should think about religious orthodoxy and the use of public houses as polling stations.

Michael Tomlinson: Again, I am grateful for the hon. Gentleman’s intervention; as ever, he is thoughtful and he has made a considered point. Although those two issues have just been pointed out to me—about Sunday tipping into Monday and using alternative provision—what my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) said still stands: if at all possible, we should avoid using schools as polling stations so that they can stay open, whether that is for nativity plays, Latin, maths, or whatever. I would not be against using a public house, as I am not for surgeries, but I take on board the point made by the hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns).

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman’s point is mainly about polling stations, but is he aware that there are big issues in booking a large enough venue to hold an election count? Many local authorities may struggle to find a venue at this time of year.

Michael Tomlinson: The hon. Lady makes an interesting point. I had not considered that but I do not think that it is a distinguishing feature, when voting on this measure, between whether the election is held on the Monday or the Thursday. I take that serious point on board but, in my view, if there is pressure on accommodation in December, it would be no different on a Monday than on a Thursday.

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that we have cast aside many traditions over the last few years and that this place has got rid of what we hold dear? If we are to have a debate about the right day for an election, surely that should be done soberly and decently, at the right time. I understand that many of our EU friends hold elections over the weekend. We should have time for a debate in future and not do this on the back of a cigarette packet today.

Michael Tomlinson: My hon. Friend is reinforcing my primary point about why I believe that the Thursday should be preferred: it is the traditional day. I do not have the precise figures, but I am sure that the Minister will when they respond to the amendments. It is traditional that these votes happen on a Thursday. It has happened on other days, but in Mid Dorset and North Poole, that is the routine and we are used to voting on a Thursday.

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Ind): I echo what my hon. Friend is saying. It seems absolutely clear that the will of the House is that elections in this country should always be on a Thursday—always on a Thursday! But the silver lining—it is a small one—to the Fixed-term Parliaments Act is that this is the first time that we have had a debate in this Chamber about elections, and there are lots of interesting ideas. My best polling station is a garden room in Woolstone. Where should we have our polling stations? More and more people are voting by post, and what about voting on an app for our young people when they are at university? [Interruption.] You see? Already a lively debate has started, so after the Tories win the election on 12 December, let us resolve, as one of the first things we do, to have a proper, full day’s debate on the manner and practice of elections in the United Kingdom.

The Second Deputy Chairman: The right hon. Gentleman is right: there is time to have a debate on the lines that he suggests, but this afternoon, we are discussing the date of the election. We are not doing that well on the chatter front, by the way, so can we revisit the fact that we need to listen very carefully to the speeches that are being made? A big effort.

Michael Tomlinson: Thank you, Dame Rosie. My right hon. Friend has great expertise in telecommunications and he makes an interesting point about technology—I take your point that it does not really take us further forward in terms of the date and this amendment, but he makes an intriguing point. I note that the Leader of the House is sitting in his place. Doubtless if my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage revisits that point on Thursday during business questions, perhaps that can be taken forward at a future date. He has certainly hit upon something. We all have an interest in this and, dare I say it, a small amount of amateur expertise on it as well.

6.45 pm

Jonathan Edwards (Carmarthen East and Dinefwr) (PC): The hon. Gentleman may not be aware that the political editor of The Sun has just tweeted that the Government have conceded on the 9 December election date. If that is the case, does he agree that we should just get on with the vote?

Michael Tomlinson: The editor of The Sun has not contacted me personally, so I was not aware of that, but I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for enlightening not just me but the whole Chamber.
Mr Mark Francois (Rayleigh and Wickford) (Con): I want to make a couple of points. First, next week is Parliament Week, and many schools already have arrangements to talk to their pupils about Parliament. That could be enlivened if by then we are in the middle of a general election. Secondly, in Rayleigh we recently experimented with establishing a polling station in the Travellers Joy pub. We had a by-election there recently against the Liberals, and we won, so I am all for it.

Michael Tomlinson: I congratulate my right hon. Friend on his recent victory. As ever, he makes a very sensible point.

Mr Nigel Evans: If the news is that a deal has been done about 9 December, it would be instructive if we were to be told, because clearly it would influence our contributions in this relatively short debate. Has my right hon. Friend had any indication of whether a deal has been done? I have the same reservations as he does. I have fought a lot of parliamentary elections in my life and have not received information directly, from the editor of The Sun or anyone else, about the rights and wrongs. Quite often they are whispers in the wind with no truth attached. They might be true on this occasion, but I have not heard. I agree, however, that it would be incredibly helpful to know if that were the case, because then speeches may be curtailed or changed. I repeat my point: whether it is on a Friday, a Monday, a Thursday—whatever the day—we will be prepared and ready. It does seem that there are advantages to a Thursday as opposed to a Monday, but if it happens to be a Monday, so be it. We will get on and fight it.

Michael Tomlinson: That is one of the key points. Thursday is the traditional day, but it is indeed important to ensure that the civil service is up and running in Northern Ireland, and that is the main reason why I will support this measure if it comes to a vote.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the then Member for Witney, my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson). He is one of the up-and-coming Members, and he has made some useful and telling points.

Michael Tomlinson: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, my right hon. Friend and my hon. Friend the Member for Harborough (Mr Steve Baker), for allowing me to catch your eye. I intend to make a very short contribution to this important debate. I am delighted to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson). He is one of the up-and-coming Members, and he has made some useful and telling points.

This is the fourth time Parliament has been asked to hold a general election. The nation has been in schism, unable to do anything worthwhile as the dreadful problem of Brexit hangs over us. I should have infinitely preferred this Parliament to have sorted the Brexit problem out so that we could have left the EU on 31 March, before holding a general election, but the fact is that we have not sorted it out, and we are now in this position.

We are in this position because the coalition Government, under my right hon. Friend the then Member for Witney, passed the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, which the Bill seeks to amend. That Act was passed in a very different time. It was passed with the purpose of ensuring that the coalition could not end early, and it was passed in undue haste, without proper consideration of what the consequences might be in a situation in which there was no overall majority in Parliament. I think that one of the first things that whoever gains a majority in the House after the election will want to do is revisit the Act to see whether we want to alter its provisions so that we never get into this situation again.

As I have said, for too long this Parliament has been paralysed. It has been three years and four months since we held the referendum.
Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I think that it seems an eternity.

Indeed, 80% of Members voted to trigger article 50, and most Conservative and Labour Members produced manifestos in 2017 in which they pledged to honour the result of the referendum, yet Parliament has still not resolved the matter. I am therefore delighted that we appear to be moving to the likelihood that the House will pass this Bill tonight. The only question that remains—posed by the Opposition’s amendment 2—is whether we will have an election on 9 or 12 December.

My marginal preference is for a Thursday election. As many Members have already said, Thursday elections are a long tradition for a number of very good reasons. Mention has been made of problems with booking halls and rooms that would be big enough for the count, but I think that most competent authorities can deal with that. Indeed, I know from discussions with my local authorities that they have already booked the venues. Those in charge of the schools, halls, libraries, garages, pubs and community centres in which the polling stations will have already been warned and will have already agreed that they can manage an election some time in December.

I take the point about the need to complete Northern Ireland business. I should have thought that we could do that on Thursday if we are to prorogue on that day, but it is vital for it to be completed, because it gives legal authority for public funds to be drawn down.

We can all discuss the pros and cons of the 9th and the 12th, and that is an important part of the debate. I think that there are some pros and cons. The 9th is marginally farther away from Christmas; however, although the venues have already been booked, an election on the 12th would give electoral registration officers a little more time to confirm those bookings, put their staff in place and make other preparations.

The staff do a terrific job during elections. We could not run an election without them. I have talked to them often during the seven elections that have taken place since I was first elected, and I know that they work incredibly hard. They often arrive at 6 in the morning and do not leave until well after the close of the polls at 10 pm. Often in my constituency—I hope no village or parish will take offence at this—the village hall is very draughty and cold, and I have seen them there pretty cold, and I would think they could be, in December, in a pretty cold situation, so I hope that they will have plenty of heaters to keep them warm.

An election now is absolutely essential. We need to resolve by a general election, through a full franchise, and by electing a new Government, a new Parliament, a new Executive, who will have the authority of that Executive. We have got to a place where ordinary public administration is now extremely difficult to effect because of the uncertainty in this place and the impossibility of the Government actually carrying a coherent programme. So I say, “Thank God” advisedly.

I also say, “Thank God,” Dame Rosie, because of the selection made by you and your colleagues under the Chairman of Ways and Means for this debate, to ensure that it is properly focused on the in-scope issues of the Bill, because obviously the temptation for any piece of legislation to then have attached to it any number of different issues in a Parliament as incoherent as this one in terms of its make-up is self-evident. The discipline brought to our proceedings today is enormously welcome.

I also say, “Thank God,” because of what the selection means for the amendment passed earlier to the programme motion. I managed to miss that vote as I was engrossed in conversation with Baron Williams of Oystermouth about drugs policy and other issues. I was so engrossed in the conversation, and so grateful for getting hold of him after four months to be able to have a conversation with him, that I literally screened the bells out of my mind and so missed that vote. I confess publicly my error and, having thought missing an important vote is impossible for any competent person to do, I put that on the record with due appropriate humility for being so distracted. So there is a godly reason for having been so distracted: the former Archbishop of Canterbury.

I want to put in a word, however, for the poor old electoral registration officers, who will be faced with the challenge of doing an election in pretty short order at a difficult time of year. To ask them then not to go on the customary day of Thursday, and to do it on a Monday instead, will produce all sorts of challenges in terms of their normal availability and polling stations and anything else that would be available on a Thursday customarily. A point was also well made—I have forgotten which colleague did so, but I think that it was made by an Opposition Member—about the need to engage on Sunday to prepare for Monday. Again, we should think to at least some degree about the burden that they will have to carry in preparing for all this.

Then we come to the whole issue of advancing this election by three days. I am as anxious as anybody else to get our governance in the United Kingdom back on a sound footing, so that there is a sound footing, and so that there is a sound coalition arrangement if a majority is not secured, although I am confident that we would win a majority at a general election. That is obviously part of my enthusiasm for us getting on and getting it done, but no one can take that for granted, as we learned from 2017.

7 pm

We need an Administration who can normally rely on a majority in this House, so if the electorate gift us the need for another coalition at least we will have the opportunity for the numbers to play out in such a way that we can have a programme for government that is sustainable and can be done on a proper basis.

We have seen the difference between what we were able to do between 2010 and 2015, with a full five-year programme in coalition with the Liberal Democrats, and the instability that ensued as a result of the numbers...
that came out in 2017. We have seen enormous difficulties, given the importance of Europe as an issue. We have seen people in all parts of the House wrestling with their conscience over the division between their loyalty to their belief in the European ideal and their loyalty to their party.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): I have just heard reference to the European ideal, and I would be grateful if my hon. Friend told me whether he has any evidence of what that really means. Has he ever heard anyone properly justify why they would want to remain in the European Union, which is utterly undemocratic and dysfunctional?

Crispin Blunt: I am extremely grateful to my hon. Friend, but I suspect I might get into a deal of trouble if I were to follow him down that rabbit hole, Madam Rosie, although I would love to. If you will allow me briefly to reply to that point, I think it is actually about an attachment to internationalism and values that we can convince our young people can be carried out on a global scale as well. If the term “global Britain” is to mean anything, it must mean the values that motivate people with the European ideal of co-operation with our neighbouring states. Britain is big enough to do that on a global scale and to make our young people proud of their country, proud of its international standing and proud of its attachment to the rule of law and the defence of human rights. We are now tantalisingly close to being able to scope a new vision for Britain, and that is one of the reasons that it is terribly important to get on with this election.

Michael Tomlinson: My hon. Friend was trying to remember who made the point about Sundays and the potential difficulties involved in holding an election on a Monday. It was my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter), rather than an Opposition Member. Perhaps that will help to jog my hon. Friend's memory and take him back to the date, which is the point of the amendment.

Crispin Blunt: I am obliged to my hon. Friend. Those three days will be extremely important to the electoral registration officers and their teams who are faced with an election in short order, in exactly the same way as they are important to us for the sound discharge of our business here. I heard the business of the House statement yesterday, in which the Leader of the House pointed out the importance of getting a Northern Ireland Budget Bill passed before we dissolve. There is obviously a Northern Ireland interest involved. There is a central divide over the Brexit agreement that the Prime Minister has secured and over our role in upholding the Good Friday agreement. Tensions have risen in Northern Ireland over the treatment of Northern Ireland, and that will of course be a proper subject for discussion in the general election, particularly in Northern Ireland. It would be a pity if good administration in Northern Ireland were further affected by us accelerating our Dissolution so fast that we cannot get the Northern Ireland Budget Bill passed in good order.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): It is absolutely essential, in the absence of a functioning Assembly and without any prospect of having the Assembly up and running any day soon, that this Government take their responsibilities extremely seriously. I understand that the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland is determined to do that and to get the Northern Ireland Budget Bill through all its stages in short order, but it is also the responsibility of this Government—I do hope the Justice Secretary is listening—to honour their commitment to the victims of historical institutional abuse in Northern Ireland and to get the compensation scheme and the legislation through this House before we rise, if we rise and dissolve for a general election. It would be morally irresponsible of the Government to allow those victims to go uncompensated until the far end of a general election. That prospect is appalling.

Crispin Blunt: The hon. Lady makes an extremely powerful point and speaks to the general thrust of my argument, which is that we will be better able to deliver sound public administration if we give ourselves these three extra days. In terms of parliamentary procedure, if there are unconventional measures that the House is agreed upon, it should be possible to get some of them through with an extra 72 hours, but that would not be possible if we curtailed ourselves with an election date of 9 December.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: One of the pieces of legislation that my hon. Friend talks about is the Domestic Abuse Bill, on which there is widespread agreement across the House. Does he agree that it should be perfectly possible to agree to get the Bill through either before we dissolve, in the wash-up?

Crispin Blunt: My hon. Friend makes an extremely good point. If we have non-contentious legislation, the three extra days will be of enormous help in assisting the tidying up of our processes than would otherwise be the case.

There has been a discussion about students and about whether their being at university on 9 December or 12 December would make a significant difference, and that was dealt with by my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson). The bulk of universities break up after 12 December anyway. We also know that the National Union of Students ran an extremely successful exercise to mobilise and register the student vote at university, which saw seats come into play that no one could have conceivably expected, such as Canterbury.

Mr Nigel Evans: The fact that students are in university must mean that they are quite bright, so they can work out whether they are registered at home, if it is different to their university town, and that they have the choice of designating only one location. They can then vote there in person, or if they have gone back home, they can have a postal vote or, indeed, a proxy vote. The Conservative party should not fear young people voting in these elections. In fact, we should welcome the fact that they are voting, because our manifesto will be far more attractive to young people than Labour’s.

Crispin Blunt: I sincerely hope that is the case. I have made submissions that I hope will make our manifesto more attractive to young people and much more forward looking.
We also ought to remember that there will be three extra days—or five, given that we will drift over the weekend—for people to get their postal votes sorted, which is important if we are to have a December election. I think it is now agreed that the absolutely overriding national interest is to resolve the strategic incoherence of the legislature and the Executive, and we will all need to mobilise people and be part of the campaign to assist people in registering for postal votes if the weather or light will affect their being able to get to a polling station.

All that will also be an additional burden on the electoral registration officers and their teams. For electoral registration officers trying to cope with the demands that we are about to present to them, the three days will be extremely important. There is a good case for widening the take-up of postal votes, not least for students and others who will be able properly to exercise the franchise to which they are entitled.

In conclusion, I hope that the House will consider my arguments. Having the election will resolve the incoherence of good public administration in the circumstances we face today. Dame Rosie, you and your colleagues have prevented us from disappearing down a rabbit hole in order to enable yet further delay and obfuscation by trying to change the nature of the franchise at very short notice. Goodness knows what problems that would then present unto the hard-pressed electoral registration officers on whose behalf I have trying to speak. I hope that the Committee will vote for sound public administration and to support our poor officials who do great work in enabling our democracy to function.

Sir William Cash: On a point of order, Dame Rosie. I seek your guidance on the selection of amendments. Am I right in believing that, although there has rightly been an enormous amount of concentration on the figures “9” and “12” in amendments 2 and 3, there is ample opportunity for us to consider the issues of clause stand part? The questions of clause 1 and clause 2 stand part are both important in their own right, and I would be glad to know whether you are able to confirm that—I noticed the Clerk nodding her head.

The Second Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Rosie Winterton): I can indeed confirm that. I would be glad to know whether you are able to confirm that—I noticed the Clerk nodding her head.

Mr Nigel Evans: [Interjection.] Somebody said “too long,” and I think he has a point.

Let us be fair: neither 9 December nor 12 December is ideal. I have not fought a general election in December. It last happened in the 1920s, and I am not that old, even though I may look at times. The timing is not ideal because, yes, it is close to Christmas and, yes, people’s minds are on other things, but the fact is we are not in an ideal situation.

The referendum was in 2016 and, three and a half years on, we still have not left the European Union because of all the wranglings of this place. There has been paralysis on this issue. We have had extension after extension, and the public have just about had enough. I recently did a tour of about 12 villages in my constituency over two days, and I talked to a lot of people. They told me, “If we can’t get Brexit done, let’s have an early general election.” They did not specify whether 9 or 12 December is the best date. In fact, there was speculation that the general election might even be on 10 or 11 December, but that has clearly been taken out of play because we are now talking about only 9 or 12 December.

My constituents told me, “If Parliament can’t get Brexit done, at least give us the opportunity to look again at the composition of Parliament.” A number of our colleagues will be leaving anyway. Some of them were going to leave in 2020, but of course the previous election came early. They decided to hang on, probably expecting this Parliament to go five years, which no longer looks likely.

If, for whatever reason, we do not have an election on 9 or 12 December, who is to say the paralysis we have experienced over the past 12 months on this one issue will not spread to other legislation? I know people argue that we should have gone on after the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill got its Second Reading, but the fact is that 217 Labour Members voted against Second Reading. They did not want any scrutiny at all. They did not care, they were just totally opposed to the Bill going into Committee to see what amendments would be tabled. It is not as if we did not have a chance.

I understand those MPs who say, “Well, we do not like 9 or 12 December, because it is too dark and too wet,” but I just think people want it over. There was an opportunity to have had the election on 15 October. We offered that date, and whoever got elected could have decided to ask for an extension to article 50 or could have continued with the withdrawal agreement Bill, and we would have left on 31 October. That has not happened, so it is either 9 or 12 December.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): May I ask the hon. Gentleman to add his support to the important reason for having those extra three days before Dissolution, which is so that we can get the business relating to Northern Ireland through, not just the finance bit, but the bit about historical institutional abuse? Northern Ireland people are feeling very neglected by this Parliament, and doing this would make them feel that at the last minute we did something to satisfy everyone in Northern Ireland who really wants that legislation to go through.

7.15 pm

Mr Evans: Northern Ireland is an integral part of the United Kingdom and the hon. Lady is right to say that we need to ensure that we have time to get the legislation that pertains to that wonderful part of the UK through properly. We must make certain there is sufficient time for that, and that the legislation is not dropped and Northern Ireland has to wait until after the next general election for that to be dealt with properly.

There are lots of other reasons involved in this. We all have staff working here as well, and they need to have proper notice for all the plans they need to make for when we have Prorogation and they leave. A lot of people outside do not realise that when Prorogation comes and this place closes those of us fighting elections are pretty well banned from the parliamentary estate. I made the grave error once of having left something in my office, and I had to arrange to come to my office during an election. I was met by a security clerk, who walked with me to my office, let me into my room—all
the rooms were locked—and then stood over me watching what I was taking out of the drawers. People do not appreciate all of this. So having an extra three days—

[Interruption.] I can see the Opposition Chief Whip laughing, but it was proper stuff that I had left behind.

[Laughter.] Yes, addresses, telephone numbers—who knows? So there is merit in having this time, as some people, particularly those elected in 2017, may not quite understand what is about to befall them when this place closes down.

It is therefore appropriate to have that lead-in and I am still persuaded by 12 December, because Thursday is the traditional day. It was probably chosen because it was the old market day. I know that lots of people have elections on a weekend. Clearly, we could have the election on a Sunday. I am a member of the Council of Europe and a lot of Council of Europe countries have general elections on a Sunday, but I can understand, from a religious point of view, why that might not be totally appropriate. I am even persuaded of having early voting, as whether it was 9 December or 12 December would not be as important for those who all of a sudden are told by their works that they have to be away. They may not know until a day before that they have to be away from their town and they may be away for two or three days, so it is too late for them to get a postal or proxy vote. I therefore rather like the idea of people being able to turn up to the town hall with proofs of identity—yes, photo ID—to prove that they are who they say they are and they live where they say they live, and then being able to cast their vote. Such an approach would mean that the ninth or the 12th, if we had this in play now, would be so important.

I hope that, no matter who wins the next general election, we can have a proper, considered debate about elections and the way they are held. We have heard all sorts of ideas about how schools should not be used, and I fully appreciate this—

Rehman Chishti: My hon. Friend uses the word “proper”. Does he agree that, as we head into this general election, it is vital that we have the firmest possible debates, but that they need to be done with civility and respect? In 2017, I had the worst campaign against me by my Labour opponent. On election night, a Labour group assistant on Medway Council said to an elected Member of Parliament who was giving his acceptance speech, “Fuck off back to country X.” My country is this great country and Gillingham is my home town, so do I fuck off back to Gillingham? That kind of—

The Second Deputy Chairman: Order. The hon. Gentleman must resume his seat. This is about the date of the election. It is not about the conduct of the election.

Mr Evans: My hon. Friend makes a very powerful point. We all know that, whether it is the 9th or the 12th, it is going to be a lively, vigorous campaign. We need to show respect, whatever the date. I was pushed by some people during the last general election campaign. A lot of people were quite surprised about that. It was outside a pub, after I had done a hustings, and all I can say is that a number of people were shocked.

Sir William Cash: My hon. Friend referred to the possibility of holding elections in schools. He might know what I am about to say. In his great constituency, there is a school called Stonyhurst College, which I happened to attend. Can he recall any occasion when Stonyhurst’s premises were used for elections?

Mr Evans: I do not believe so. It was used as the venue for the count for the by-election and the subsequent general election, which was fortunately only 12 months after, because I lost the by-election, but then won the general election in 1992.

We do not want to lose any school time. Nativity plays have been mentioned. We do not want to lose nativity plays, either. It has been said that losing some nativity plays at least brings to an end the farce that has gone on here. I fully appreciate that, but we do not want to inflict any sorrow on children who have been rehearsing for their nativity plays. If the election is on 12 December rather than 9 December, it will give schools the opportunity to plan ahead and to make sure that the rooms that are used will not conflict with any nativity plays.

Whether the election is on 9 or 12 December, people who are listening to this debate ought to take the opportunity now to ensure that they have postal votes or proxy votes. I have already bumped into a number of people who told me that they are going trekking in the Himalayas and are going to be away for five weeks. People are going on cruises and all that sort of stuff. I hope that people take precautions now. The most important thing at a general election is for people not to lose their vote and to be able to participate in helping to vote for the next Government of this country. Whether the election is on 9 or 12 December, I hope people vote Conservative and ensure that we deliver the Brexit that they voted for at the referendum.

Sir Desmond Swayne: I do not know if it is just my easy-going charm, but the worst I have ever heard in Pontypridd, West Bromwich and the New Forest is, “Sorry, mate—I’m Labour.” I hope that the Hansard reporters will not feel the necessity to record verbatim some of the words that we have heard this evening.

When the Minister replies, I would like him to comment on the implications of the difference of the three days between the two dates that stand before us and how that will impact on the date for nominations, and whether those days will fall either side of the publication of the new electoral register. When the new nomination form is filled out, the electoral numbers have to be recorded, and those numbers will undoubtedly have changed after 1 December. Is that going to present a problem? If so, I wonder if the Minister could draw attention to that.

Mr John Whittingdale (Maldon) (Con): My right hon. Friend raises an important point. There is an essential democratic process that needs to be conducted before a general election, which is the selection of candidates. I suspect quite a large number of constituencies have not yet selected candidates. Members of local associations need these extra few days to have time to go through that process, and to avoid having candidates imposed from the centre.

Sir Desmond Swayne: We have had two Divisions in recent weeks on whether there should be an election, so I would have thought that those associations ought
properly to have attended to the question of getting on with selecting candidates. I am sorry to hear that they have not, but there is not much that we can do about that. Certainly, the additional days would be of some assistance.

Crispin Blunt: My right hon. Friend should understand that, of course, central parties have a role in overseeing the selections in constituency associations. Therefore, a timetable has been applied to associations, which are anxious to select their candidates, but they have not been able to do so. I know that because of my engagement with East Surrey, which is not keen to have a selection shortlist of the kind that it had in 2010.

Sir Desmond Swayne: I can assure my hon. Friend that the independent members of my New Forest association would not tolerate anyone imposing a candidate or superintending the process, and I would hope that other constituencies would follow a similar line.

I will, if I may, come to the question of students. We have heard that, overwhelmingly, students choose to vote at home, that postal and proxy votes are available, and that 40 of the top universities will still be sitting on 12 September.

I believe that my hon. Friend the Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans) was quite mistaken in an earlier intervention on my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Dorset and North Poole (Michael Tomlinson). He implied that students could be registered at only one address. That is not the case. Students are entitled to register at both addresses. Of course, it is important that they vote at only one of them. When I was the chairman of the Saint Andrews University Conservative Association—a former friend, Alex Salmond, will remember these events well—I saw it as my duty to ensure that all members of the Conservative Association were registered at both addresses, so that, in an election, we would be able to inform them as to where their vote would count for more. I undertook that task. Unfortunately, on the evening of the referendum, I think, in 1979, I was visited by members of Special Branch and charged with 53 offences against the False Oaths (Scotland) Act 1933. I got off the charges, but I was certainly a very frightened experience. In those days, universities and university political associations went to great lengths to ensure that all their members were registered at both addresses. If that has continued, then it should not be a problem.

I conclude by saying that, having heard the speech—the very impressive Second Reading speech—of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Yardley (Jess Phillips), I can assure my hon. Friend that I would not be voting for this Bill with any great enthusiasm if she were the leader of the Labour party.

Sir William Cash: The clause stand part provisions raise very important questions of principle, which we must consider very carefully. It all goes to the question of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011 itself. On Second Reading, I made the point very clearly—for those who are interested in looking at how that disgraceful Act was put through the House—that I was very, very strongly against it. I looked through the Division lists earlier on. I see the right hon. Friend—the Member for New Forest West (Sir Desmond Swayne) in his place—I think that he was the Parliamentary Private Secretary to the Prime Minister at the time. I incurred the wrath of the Prime Minister by my absolute determination to do everything possible to ruin the Fixed-term Parliaments Act. In fact, I am afraid to say that we managed to muster only 10 Members of Parliament, and not always that. On one occasion, I found myself with just one other person—the then Member of Parliament for Aldridge Brownhills, Sir Richard Shepherd. He and I ended up as the only ones who voted on that. That is why I am specifically thinking about the manner in which this important Bill is being brought through the House. There was a particular amendment that I took the gravest interest in during the passage of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, and we are now dealing with an amendment to make provision for a parliamentary general election to be held on 9 December as compared with 12 December—the date in the Bill itself. It has already been ruled that clause stand part is an integral part of these proceedings, and I have every intention of making the points that I want to make on that, having had the ruling that I did from the previous incumbent of the Chair.

I refer to a very important website called the Public Whip. When I got my information from the Library today, I noticed that the Public Whip said that I—the Member of Parliament for Stone—strongly against” the Fixed-term Parliaments Act. I can tell hon. Members why, and it is very simple. I was against it because it gave the Whips an undemocratic power and created the shenanigans of upsetting the rule regarding simple majorities for general elections; and that is why we are in the mess we are in now.

7.30 pm

Mr Duncan Smith: I was a member of the Government at the time of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, and was therefore bound to support the proposals. However, I recall that one of the discussions that took place was that there should be a sunset clause, meaning that the provision’s short purpose, which was to do with sustaining a Government at the time, would have gone away and we would have returned to the other method. I did make the point, as I am sure my hon. Friend has, that when we fiddle with the constitution without proper checks and balances, there will almost invariably be very heavy consequences, but that point was never quite taken.

Sir William Cash: Indeed. It is when sunset comes to an end that Dracula comes out of his crypt. I am not referring to my right hon. Friend, of course. What I am saying, however, is that the consequences of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act have been abominable for the proceedings in this House.

Mr Whittingdale: May I congratulate my hon. Friend on the perspicacity that he showed during the passage of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, as he has done on so many other occasions? He might recall that the then leader of the Liberal Democrats advocated the Fixed-term Parliaments Act on the basis that it would give much greater political stability to our system in future years. Does my hon. Friend agree that that was about as accurate a prediction as all other Liberal Democrat predictions?

Sir William Cash: Absolutely, and of course that legislation was cobbled together for the very simple reason that they wanted to keep in with the Liberal
Democrats. That was the real purpose of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, and it was one of the most pernicious aspects of the coalition.

I understand, by the way, that part of the coalition deal included a plan to get rid of the 1922 committee. The coalition wanted to bring Ministers into that committee, which would have destroyed it. I fired what could be described as an almighty Exocet, and guaranteed that Ministers would not be allowed to vote—on the pro bono advice that we received from a very eminent QC whom I instructed.

A book by Matthew d’Ancona was brought to my attention a few months ago. On reading it, I found—to my astonishment but great interest—that the then Prime Minister, in a conclave with his closest advisers before the coalition began, was talking about the coalition and how he was going to conduct his Prime Ministership, and he said to those advisers, “I have a choice to make. Am I going to go into a coalition with Nick Clegg or Bill Cash?” I found that most interesting.

That is why this clause stand part debate is highly relevant. We have this extraordinary situation in which the whole issue of an early general election is, largely speaking, the product of all the shenanigans on the Opposition Benches and the other shenanigans with our own colleagues in the House, some of whom lost the Whip and all the rest of it. I strongly believe that this business of having a general election, which, but for this Bill, would not have been put through, is connected with the very reason why people wanted a coalition. This Bill cashed in on the very reason why people wanted a coalition back in 2010, which was to stop people like me banging on about Europe. I remember the then Prime Minister, saying that—but they did not have a chance. That point has to be made.

Craig Mackinlay: My hon. Friend is making the most excellent points about the drawbacks of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, which he was opposed to. Does he think that there is a salutary lesson here that this place should not legislate in haste at any time? Does he share my concerns about the rapidity and danger of the Benn surrender Act, which will stain this House for many years to come? Its effects are being seen today and will be with us for a very, very long time.

Sir William Cash: That is absolutely right.

Over the centuries, Parliaments have acquired their own names. For example, we have had the Barebones Parliament, the Rump Parliament and the Addled Parliament, and there has been the Mad Parliament. This Parliament ought to be called what it has now become—the Purgatory Parliament, with the shenanigans from the Opposition and from those who have been determined to remain in the European Union at any price. I have often had to upbraid them. I remember saying:

“I have heard of rats leaving a sinking ship but never of rats trying to sink a leaving ship.” —[Official Report, 18 July 2018; Vol. 645, c. 503;]

That remains on the record from some months ago. I say it again for this reason: I believe very, very strongly that it is unconscionable that we should not have this general election. We need it because, above all else, we had the referendum which was itself put into effect by virtue of this House deciding, by six to one, that it would have it. That was in the parties’ manifestos. Opposition Members voted—some of them did and a few did not—by 499 to 126 for the European Union (Notification of Withdrawal) Act 2017. Every single Conservative Member of Parliament, even the right hon. and learned Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke), voted for the European Union (Withdrawal) Act 2018, which received Royal Assent on 26 June 2018.

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): My hon. Friend talked about rats. The exact quotation, if I recall it correctly, is that there are many examples in history of rats leaving a sinking ship but only one of mice joining one.

Sir William Cash: Ha, ha—well, I must say I find that very amusing, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend for saying it.

The name that this Parliament has now acquired and deserves—the Purgatory Parliament—is, I believe, appropriate and right in the circumstances. I would say this to the Committee, as I did some weeks ago on another occasion: in the name of God, go. I believe that this is the moment for this Parliament to depart, in the words of Oliver Cromwell all those years ago. The Speaker has quite frequently referred to 17th-century precedents, so I say again to this Parliament: in the name of God, go. Let us get on with a general election and let us get Brexit done.

Mr Baker: Amendment 14 has the effect of aligning the registration deadline for Scotland with the registration deadline in the rest of the United Kingdom, by removing the need for the St Andrew’s day bank holiday in Scotland to be taken into account. I congratulate the Minister on his wisdom in bringing forward that sensible amendment, but I wonder whether he could confirm that Scotland is being treated fairly with this amendment. On the Conservative Benches, we are most concerned to ensure the fair treatment of Scotland. We are very proud that Scotland is in the United Kingdom, and we are determined to ensure the fair treatment of people throughout the great country of Scotland.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Mr Baker: I knew that one of them would not be able to resist.

Patrick Grady: I hate to burst the hon. Gentleman’s bubble, but if the Government had thought it through, that would have been provided for in the original Bill. This may well have been gently pointed out to them from sources other than their own Benches.

Mr Baker: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. He has just proven to me that, contrary to the remarks we hear so often from those on the SNP Benches, sometimes the British Government listen to the voice of Scotland, respect the voice of Scotland and act on the voice of Scotland. I am very proud of those on the Treasury Bench and grateful to the Minister for doing just that.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): My hon. Friend talks about the voice of Scotland. It is listened to, but he must remember that the SNP are not Scotland. They may sell themselves as such, but they are not Scotland.
Mr Baker: I am grateful to my hon. Friend, who reminds me that he is one of the most powerful champions of the voice of Scotland. Though I wish to pay tribute to him for a little longer, I should move on to amendments 2 and 3, which seek to change the date of the election. Why anyone would wish to move the date from the traditional day of a Thursday to a Monday, I cannot imagine. I am rather concerned that it is based on some perceived advantage of holding the poll on a Monday, which obviously would not be appropriate.

Dame Eleanor, I hope you will forgive me if I dilate a little on some of the other amendments. I received some constituency correspondence today asking me to back amendment 1, which relates to citizens of the European Union. Whatever our love for the citizens of the European Union who are in the UK, and however willing and delighted we are to embrace their work and welcome them to stay in the UK, it would be quite wrong to expand the franchise—

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order. I understand why the hon. Gentleman is taking this opportunity to speak to amendment 1, but as that amendment has not been selected, it is out of order for him to speak to it. However, if he were to make his remarks in the context of amendments 2 or 3, he would be in order.

Mr Baker: Thank you, Dame Eleanor. I will just say, in the context of amendments 2 or 3, that any attempt to gerrymander the poll to try to produce a particular result would be wrong and outrageous. Some of the other amendments tabled, which went beyond amendments 2 and 3, were quite blatant attempts to produce a particular result. That is wrong, and I am grateful that they have not been selected.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Is my hon. Friend aware that, if the marvellous Laura Kuenssberg is to be selected, it would be quite unconstitutional. I think its Members would be quite unconstitutional. I think its Members would be playing with fire and, indeed, they would be playing with their own futures in that House were they to seek to amend the Bill to produce a particular outcome.

The First Deputy Chairman of Ways and Means (Dame Eleanor Laing): Thank you—perfect timing.

Question put, That the amendment be made.

The Committee divided: Ayes 295, Noes 315.

Division No. 15 [7.45 pm]

AYES

Abbot, rh Ms Diane
Abrahams, Debbie
Ali, Rushanara
Allen, Heidi
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Amessbury, Mike
Antoniazzi, Tonia
Ashworth, Jonathan
Bailey, Mr Adrian
Bardell, Hannah
Barron, rh Sir Kevin
Beckett, rh Margaret
Benn, rh Hilary
Berger, Luciana
Betts, Mr Clive
Black, Mhairi
Blackford, rh Ian
Blackman, Kirsty
Blomfield, Paul
Brabin, Tracy
Bradshaw, rh Mr Ben
Brake, rh Tom
Brennan, Kevin
Brock, Deidre
Brown, Alan
Brown, Lyn
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bryant, Chris
Buck, Ms Karen
Burden, Richard
Burgon, Richard
Butler, Dawn
Byrne, rh Liam
Cable, rh Sir Vince
Cadbury, Ruth
Cameron, Dr Lisa
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Mr Ronnie
Carden, Dan
Carmichael, rh Mr Alistair
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Douglas
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bambos
Cherry, Joanna
Clwyd, rh Ann
Coaker, Vernon
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, Rosie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Cowan, Ronnie
Coyle, Neil
Crausby, Sir David
Crawley, Angela
Creagh, Mary
Creasy, Stella
Craddes, Jon

Cryer, John
Cummins, Judith
Cunningham, Alex
Cunningham, Mr Jim
Dakin, Nic
Davey, rh Sir Edward
David, Wayne
Davies, Gerra
t
Day, Martyn
De Cordova, Marsha
De Piero, Gloria
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tammanjeet Singh
 Docherty-Hughes, Martin
Dodd, Anneliese
Dodds, Jane
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
Esterson, Bill
Evans, Chris (Proxy vote cast
by Mark Tami)
Farron, Tim
Fellows, Marion
Field, rh Frank
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Forbes, Lisa
Fovargue, Yvonne
Foxcroft, Vicky
Frith, James
Furniss, Gill
Gaffney, Hugh
Gardiner, Barry
George, Ruth
Gethins, Stephen
Gibson, Patricia
Gill, Preet Kaur
Glindon, Mary
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goodman, Helen
Grady, Patrick
Grant, Peter
Gray, Neil
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Grogan, John
Spellar, rh John
Starmer, rh Keir
Stephens, Chris
Stevens, Jo
Stone, Jamie
Streeting, Wes
Stringer, Graham
Sweeney, Mr Paul
Swinson, Jo
Tami, rh Mark
Thewliis, Alison
Thomas, Gareth
Thomas-Symonds, Nick
Thornberry, rh Emily
Timms, rh Stephen
Trickett, Jon
Turley, Anna
Tumer, Karl
Twigg, Stephen
Twist, Liz

Adams, Nigel
Afolami, Bim
Afriyie, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Amess, Sir David
Argar, Edward
Atkins, Victoria
Austin, Ian
Bacon, Mr Richard
Badenoch, Mrs Kemi (Proxy vote cast by Leo Docherty)
Baker, Mr Steve
Baldwin, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Baron, Mr John
Bellingham, Sir Henry
Benyon, rh Richard
Beresford, Sir Paul
Berry, rh Jake
Blackman, Bob
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella (Proxy vote cast by Mr Steve Baker)
Breton, Jack
Bridge, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Brokenshire, rh James
Bruce, Fiona
Buckland, rh Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burns, rh Connor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Cartlidge, James
Cash, Sir William
Caulfield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Chishti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin

Umuna, Chuka
Vaz, rh Valerie
Walker, Thelma
Watson, Tom
West, Catherine
Western, Matt
Whitehead, Dr Alan
Whitfield, Martin
Whittord, Dr Philippa
Williams, Hywel
Williams, Dr Paul
Williamson, Chris
Wilson, Phil
Wishtart, Pete
Wollaston, Dr Sarah
Yasin, Mohammad
Zeichner, Daniel

NOES

Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Simon
Cleverly, rh James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coffey, Ann
Coffey, rh Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Costa, Alberto
Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crouch, Tracey
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glynn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davies, rh Mr David
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherthy, Leo
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Dowden, rh Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Duddridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Ellis, rh Michael
Ellwood, Mr Tobias
Elphicke, Charlie
Eustice, George
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evannett, rh Sir David
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Mark
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazier, Lucy
Freeman, George
Frerer, Mike
Fysh, Mr Marcus
(4) For the purposes of regulation 29(4) of the Representation of the People (Scotland) Regulations 2001 (S.I. 2001/497) (which sets out a period for objecting to applications for registration), regulation 8(3) of those Regulations applies as if 2 December 2019 were not a bank holiday.”—(Jeremy Quin.)

This amendment has the effect of aligning the registration deadline for Scotland with the registration deadline in the rest of the United Kingdom, by removing the need for the St Andrew’s Day bank holiday in Scotland to be taken into account.

Clause 1, as amended, ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clause 2 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Mr Chris Leslie (Nottingham East) (IGC): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. I was hoping to move my manuscript amendment on Report. If the
Bill has been amended, it should be reported to the House, and therefore I would like to move the manuscript amendment standing in my name.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I could not hear the hon. Gentleman very well, but is he suggesting that he would like to re-table or put in some other way an amendment that he had previously tabled and that had not been selected for discussion and a vote earlier today?

Mr Leslie: No, Madam Deputy Speaker. Now that the Bill has exited Committee, it is to be reported to the House. I have tabled a manuscript amendment for Report and should now like to move it.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Now that the hon. Gentleman has raised the point, I am aware that he has tabled an amendment. I now have his amendment before me and am reading it. Because the knife has fallen, it is not suitable for discussion at this time.

Bill, as amended, reported.

Question put forthwith (Order, this day), That the Bill be now read the Third time.

The House divided: Ayes 438, Noes 20.

Division No. 16] [8.5 pm

AYES

Abbott, rh Ms Diane
Adams, Nigel
Afzal, Imran
Ainley, Adam
Aldous, Peter
Allan, Lucy
Allin-Khan, Dr Rosena
Allan, Lucy
Aldous, Peter
Afriyie, Adam
Afolami, Bim
Adams, Nigel
Abbott, rh Ms Diane

Courts, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crausby, Sir David
Couch, Tracey
Cruddas, Jon
David, Wayne
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
De Piere, Gloria
Debono, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, Anneliese
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Doughty, Stephen
Downer, rh Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Dromey, Jack
Dudridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellis, rh Michael
Ellwood, rh Mr Tobias
Elmore, Chris
Elphicke, Charlie
Esterson, Bill
Eustice, George
Evans, Chris (Proxy vote cast by Mark Tami)
Evans, Mr Nigel
Evans, Mr Tami
Fabricant, Michael
Fallon, rh Sir Michael
Field, rh Frank
Field, rh Mark
Fitzpatrick, Jim
Fletcher, Colleen
Flint, rh Caroline
Forbes, Lisa
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
Frazer, Lucy
Freeman, George
Frer, Mike
Frid, James
Furness, Gill
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gaffney, Hugh
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
George, Ruth
Ghani, Ms Nusrat

Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goldsmith, rh 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
Green, Kate
Greenwood, Lilian
Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Andrew
Grogan, John
Gwynee, Andrew
Hair, Kirstene
Hallon, rh Robert
Hamilton, Fabian
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Herbert, rh Nick
Hill, Mike
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoej, Kate
Hollern, Kate
Hollingbery, Sir George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holloboe, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunter, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Hussain, Imran
Jack, rh Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkins, Andrea
Jennick, rh Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, rh Joseph

Baker, Mr Steve
Baldauf, Harriett
Barclay, rh Stephen
Baldwin, Rhodri
Betts, Mr Clive
Blackman, Bob
Blomfield, Paul
Blunt, Crispin
Bone, Mr Peter
Bottomley, Sir Peter
Bowie, Andrew
Brabin, Tracy
Bradley, Ben
Bradley, rh Karen
Brady, Sir Graham
Braverman, Suella (Proxy vote cast by Mr Steve Baker)

Breton, Jack
Bridgen, Andrew
Brine, Steve
Breakenshire, rh James
Brown, rh Mr Nicholas
Bruce, Fiona
Bryant, Chris
Buckland, rh Robert
Burghart, Alex
Burgon, Richard
Burns, rh Mr Conor
Burt, rh Alistair
Cairns, rh Alun
Campbell, rh Sir Alan
Campbell, Mr Gregory
Carden, Dan
Cardige, James
Cash, Sir William
Caufield, Maria
Chalk, Alex
Champion, Sarah
Chapman, Jenny
Charalambous, Bamboos
Chishiti, Rehman
Chope, Sir Christopher
Churchill, Jo
Clark, Colin
Clark, rh Greg
Clarke, Mr Simon
Clervery, rh James
Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
Coker, Vernon
Coffee, rh Dr Thérèse
Collins, Damian
Cooper, Julie
Cooper, rh Yvette
Corbyn, rh Jeremy
Costa, Alberto

Court, Robert
Cox, rh Mr Geoffrey
Crabb, rh Stephen
Crausby, Sir David
Crouch, Tracey
Cruddas, Jon
David, Wayne
Davies, David T. C.
Davies, Glyn
Davies, Mims
Davies, Philip
Davis, rh Mr David
De Piere, Gloria
Debono, Thangam
Dent Coad, Emma
Dhesi, Mr Tanmanjeet Singh
Dinenage, Caroline
Djanogly, Mr Jonathan
Docherty, Leo
Dodds, Anneliese
Dodds, rh Nigel
Donaldson, rh Sir Jeffrey M.
Donelan, Michelle
Dorries, Ms Nadine
Double, Steve
Doughty, Stephen
Downer, rh Oliver
Doyle-Price, Jackie
Drax, Richard
Dromey, Jack
Dudridge, James
Duguid, David
Duncan, rh Sir Alan
Duncan Smith, rh Mr Iain
Dunne, rh Mr Philip
Eagle, Ms Angela
Eagle, Maria
Efford, Clive
Ellis, rh Michael
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Fitzpatrick, Jim
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Flint, rh Caroline
Forbes, Lisa
Ford, Vicky
Foster, Kevin
Francois, rh Mr Mark
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Freer, Mike
Frid, James
Furness, Gill
Fysh, Mr Marcus
Gaffney, Hugh
Gale, rh Sir Roger
Gardiner, Barry
Garnier, Mark
Gauke, rh Mr David
George, Ruth
Ghani, Ms Nusrat

Gibb, rh Nick
Gillan, rh Dame Cheryl
Girvan, Paul
Glen, John
Godsiff, Mr Roger
Goldsmith, rh Zac
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Graham, Luke
Graham, Richard
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Grant, Mrs Helen
Gray, James
Grayling, rh Chris
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Green, rh Damian
Green, Kate
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Greenwood, Margaret
Griffith, Nia
Griffiths, Andrew
Grogan, John
Gwynee, Andrew
Hair, Kirstene
Hallon, rh Robert
Hamilton, Fabian
Hammond, Stephen
Hancock, rh Matt
Hands, rh Greg
Hanson, rh David
Hardy, Emma
Harper, rh Mr Mark
Harrington, Richard
Harris, Rebecca
Harrison, Trudy
Hart, Simon
Hayes, Helen
Hayes, rh Sir John
Heald, rh Sir Oliver
Heappey, James
Heaton-Harris, Chris
Heaton-Jones, Peter
Henderson, Gordon
Hendrick, Sir Mark
Herbert, rh Nick
Hill, Mike
Hinds, rh Damian
Hoare, Simon
Hodgson, Mrs Sharon
Hoej, Kate
Hollern, Kate
Hollingbery, Sir George
Hollinrake, Kevin
Holloboe, Mr Philip
Holloway, Adam
Howell, John
Huddleston, Nigel
Hughes, Eddie
Hunter, rh Mr Jeremy
Hurd, rh Mr Nick
Hussain, Imran
Jack, rh Mr Alister
James, Margot
Javid, rh Sajid
Jayawardena, Mr Ranil
Jenkin, Sir Bernard
Jenkins, Andrea
Jennick, rh Robert
Johnson, rh Boris
Johnson, Dr Caroline
Johnson, Gareth
Johnson, rh Joseph
Bill read the Third time and passed.

Question accordingly agreed to.

**Liz Saville Roberts** (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Today's vote lays down precedents which override the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011, thus overriding one of Parliament's checks and balances against excessive Executive power. Can you advise how to protect democracy in this place from further such government by fiat?

**Mr Speaker:** We are in unusual times; there have been many examples to evidence that over the last few months.

**Thomson, Ross** (Thornberry, rh Emily)
**Throup, Maggie**
**Tohurist, Kelly**
**Tomlinson, Justin**
**Tomlinson, Michael**
**Tracey, Craig**
**Tredinnick, David**
**Trevellyan, Anne-Marie**
**Trickett, Jon**
**Tugendhat, Tom**
**Twist, Liz**
**Vaizey, rh Mr Edward**
**Vara, Mr Shailesh**
**Vaz, rh Valerie**
**Vickers, Martin**
**Villiers, rh Theresa**
**Walker, Sir Charles**
**Walker, Mr Robin**
**Walker, Thelma**
**Wallace, rh Mr Ben**
**Warburton, David**
**Warman, Matt**
**Watling, Giles**
**Whately, Helen**
**Wheeler, Mrs Heather**
**Whittaker, Craig**
**Whittingdale, rh Mr John**
**Wiggin, Bill**
**Williamson, Chris**
**Williamson, rh Gavin**
**Wilson, rh Sammy**
**Wood, Mike**
**Wragg, Mr William**
**Wright, rh Jeremy**
**Yasin, Mohammad**
**Zahawi, Nadhim**

**Tellers for the Ayes:**
**Stuart Andrew and Iain Stewart**

**NOES**

**MacNeill, Angus Brendan**
**Owen, Albert**
**Saville Roberts, rh Liz**
**Sheerman, Mr Barry**
**Smith, Principal**
**Smith, rh Anna**
**Williams, Hyywel**
**Zeichner, Daniel**

**Tellers for the Nos:**
**Ben Lake and Mr Chris Leslie**
that the will of the House determines what happens in these matters, subject to the overriding principle of adherence to a clear rule. The right hon. Lady strongly objects to what has happened, but nothing that has happened today has been in any way disorderly: a Bill has been introduced; there has been a Second Reading; there has been a Committee stage; and there was a business of the House motion, in amended form, accepted by the House. The right hon. Lady has registered her discontent, which I was very happy for her to do, but beyond that the matter cannot be taken further tonight.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (IGC): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I know that it is sometimes uncomfortable to speak truth to power. Mr Speaker, would it be in order to record that, in private, many of us have come to the conclusion that the majority of Back Benchers on both sides do not want a general election? As the right hon. Member for Dwyfor Meirionnydd (Liz Saville Roberts) has said, fear, from whatever quarter it may come, will be an abiding thing that will come out of this Parliament, and history will record that. A lack of courage from too many is also a mark of the end of this Parliament. Would it also be in order to record that I know from the conversations that take place in private—as you understand, Mr Speaker—that it is undoubtedly a fact that the majority of Members of this Parliament support a people’s vote rather than a general election?

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady, who always speaks her mind, and I respect that. I know, however, that she will accept that that was a case of the right hon. Lady wanting to tell me and the House what she thought, rather than having any particular interest in me telling her what I think. But I will tell her what I think. What I think is that we do not work in this place on the basis of what people may or may not say to each other in private; we work on the basis of the decisions that are made by the House, and the House has made a decision in a perfectly orderly way. She has registered her objection to it, and we will have to leave it there. I hope—I sense that there is an appetite for this—we can now proceed with the business statement.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD) rose—

Mr Speaker: Well, I gently say to the hon. Gentleman, to the hon. Lady—I do beg her pardon—that it is quite important to have antennae attuned to the will of the House, so if she is going to do it, it will be one sentence.

Christine Jardine: On a point of order, Mr Speaker. For three and a half years, the Liberal Democrats have campaigned for the people of this country to have the final say. We would have preferred that to be in the form of a people’s vote, and we would now have preferred the general election to be on 9 December. But, Parliament having decided, we are ready to take this issue back and give people the chance to say whether Brexit is something they want to stop. [Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Somebody has said from a sedentary position that that was not a point of order, but I must say, for the benefit of members of the public, that does not distinguish it from the overwhelming majority of what I will call purported points of order that are, in fact, not points of order. The hon. Lady has made her point, and we must now proceed with the business statement by the Leader of the House of Commons, Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg.
The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): Following the decision of the House to pass the Early Parliamentary General Election Bill, I should like to make a short statement regarding the business for tomorrow. The business for tomorrow will be a general debate on the report from the Grenfell Tower inquiry, led by the Prime Minister, followed by a business of the House motion and all stages of the Northern Ireland Budget Bill. You will be very glad to know that I shall make a further business statement to the House tomorrow regarding the business for the rest of the week.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for his statement—we should not keep meeting like this. The Opposition agree with the business statement.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the right hon. Lady.

Mr Speaker: Before I call Pete Wishart, I appeal to Members who are leaving the Chamber—say I, playing for time—to do so quickly and quietly, so that the remaining Members can attend to what the hon. Gentleman wishes to say on the matter of this relatively narrow business statement. If people are about to be beaten out of the House walking past the hon. Gentleman, I hope that they will do so quickly so that he is not interrupted as he orates in his inimitable fashion.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): It will not be a point for oration when I get down to the business that the Leader of the House has announced. I join the shadow Leader of the House in saying that we must stop meeting like this for these impromptu business statements. However, we will all miss them and the Leader of the House’s genuinely individual style as he announces emergency business statement after emergency business statement. We look forward to the next enthralling episode tomorrow, when we will all be congregated again, and the three of us will obviously enjoy the get-together that we have been experiencing over the past few weeks.

The SNP has no problem with or objection to the business announcement, and we look forward to the debate on Grenfell. I also look forward to our continuing get-togethers, which have become a regular feature of our time in the House. Finally, we are pleased that the Bill passed this evening. It is worth saying that, under our time in the House. Finally, we are pleased that the get-togethers, which have become a regular feature of business announcement, and we look forward to the debate that we have been experiencing over the past few weeks.

The SNP has no problem with or objection to the business announcement, and we look forward to the debate on Grenfell. I also look forward to our continuing get-togethers, which have become a regular feature of our time in the House. Finally, we are pleased that the Bill passed this evening. It is worth saying that, under our time in the House, but it is always so apparent in private.

Mr Rees-Mogg: May I just say what a pleasure it is to see the hon. Gentleman’s good nature shine through in a question? He normally keeps it so carefully hidden on the Floor of the House, but it is always so apparent in private.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Does the Leader of the House agree that this is one of those days on which I want to go home and watch Laura Kuenssberg to find out what the hell is going on in this place? I feel that his statement was not very full. He did not mention the election of the new Speaker and said nothing about this week’s Prime Minister’s questions. Can he fill us in with a little more detail about what the hell is going on?

Mr Rees-Mogg: All the routine Question Times will continue to take place in the normal way while this Parliament is in existence. Parliament has to be dissolved in accordance with the Bill, if it completes its passage in the House of Lords, at one minute past midnight on Wednesday. That date is set at 25 working days backwards from the date of the general election, with an exemption to cover the bank holiday in Scotland for St Andrew’s day. I accept that I am not giving further business, but that is fairly normal at the end of a Parliament when we will have to look at what items need to be washed up and dealt with. I can therefore absolutely assure the House that I will come back with further statements as necessary.

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): Does the Leader of the House anticipate that the House will be meeting at all next week? Does he anticipate that we will be electing a new Speaker before the House dissolves?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That will depend on the progress of business and the date of Prorogation. We will have to see how rapidly business progresses, but the Dissolution date is Wednesday, so it is perfectly possible for the House to be sitting on Monday and Tuesday next week.

Mike Gapes (Ilford South) (IGC): Will the Leader of the House ensure that all staff employed by Members of this House are given urgent advice about what might be necessary for them to do, particularly where their Member may be retiring or might not be re-elected?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is an extraordinarily important point. When talk of an early general election first started in September, the House authorities started working on updating the information that is available to staff and to Members—both potentially returning Members and retiring Members—to ensure that they are fully informed of what happens and what the conditions and provisions are. I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for raising that point, and I know that the House authorities will also have heard it. If the information has not already been distributed, it will be distributed as a matter of urgency.

Ian Murray (Edinburgh South) (Lab): Just to follow up the point raised by the hon. Member for Ilford South (Mike Gapes), I tabled an amendment to the Early Parliamentary General Election Bill that was not selected, and it said that any member of staff who has worked for a current Member for a continuous period should be considered for additional redundancy payments, given that, if the Member were to lose their seat, they will get only a month’s redundancy payment and they will lose their job on 12 December.

Will the Leader of the House look at that with the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority and the House authorities to ensure that the staff of Members who stand down or lose their seat are not disadvantaged over the Christmas and new year period?
Mr Rees-Mogg: That is an important point. We are all very grateful to the staff we have supporting us, both those working for us as constituency MPs and those working for the House authorities. This House is extraordinarily well served by people who are dedicated above and beyond the requirements of duty. Those of us who, as constituency MPs, deal with a busy postbag often find that our staff have dealt with problems for our constituents before they have even brought them to our attention.

We are very lucky with the staff we have, and I am always keen that they should be treated as well as possible. I will certainly undertake to make representations on the hon. Gentleman’s behalf to IPSA. It is always difficult to find a fair balance where taxpayers’ money is being used, but my sympathies are very much with staff and in favour of looking after them well.

Helen Goodman (Bishop Auckland) (Lab): Will the Leader of the House clarify whether the election of a new Speaker will take place next week? Many Members will obviously have a view on where they wish to be if that election is taking place.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Unfortunately, I have nothing to add to the answer I gave some moments ago.

Dr Lisa Cameron (East Kilbride, Strathaven and Lesmahagow) (SNP): Will the Leader of the House ensure there is robust guidance for parliamentary security and security forces across the United Kingdom, particularly given the outcome of Lord Bew’s report on intimidation and bullying in public life, so that all candidates from all backgrounds can stand in the next general election without fear of abuse?

Mr Rees-Mogg: That is a point of fundamental importance to our democracy. I had a meeting earlier today with the head of security in the House of Commons and with a representative of the Metropolitan police, and we discussed a number of security matters relating to Members. Obviously, it is important that candidates feel safe, too, and I am sure the Home Office will send out guidance to returning officers. It is important that, as the hon. Lady says, people from all backgrounds feel safe standing for Parliament.

We are in a tense period, as I think everybody recognises, and the temperature around the issues we are facing is higher than it has been previously, and therefore there is more cause for concern than perhaps there was in elections in 2015, 2010 and before. I take what the hon. Lady says very seriously, and I will bring it to the attention of both the Home Secretary and the House authorities.

PETITIONS

**West Cumbria coal mine**

8.38 pm

Tim Farron (Westmorland and Lonsdale) (LD): I present a petition on behalf of 1,852 residents of Cumbria who oppose the proposed West Cumbrian coal mine, believing, as I do, that in the fight to prevent climate catastrophe, it is vital that we keep fossil fuels in the ground. The petitioners request that the Secretary of State call in the application for his own determination at the earliest opportunity and that he rule against the opening of the mine.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of people of the United Kingdom, Declares that a local petition has been collected against the proposed west Cumbria coal mine which should not be opened on account of the impact on the climate. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to call this application in for its own determination at the earliest opportunity and that it rules against the opening of the mine. And the petitioners remain, etc.]

**19A First Bus Glasgow service**

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents to maintain the 19A First Bus Glasgow service and to establish a free municipal bus service.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Glasgow North East, Declares that the 19A local bus service between Robroyston and Glasgow City Centre and operated by First Glasgow is a lifeline for local residents and allows them to frequently access vital local services and the city centre of Glasgow; the provision of public transport in this area is already poor, and this service cut, and the move to an hourly motorway express service with no Sunday service, would only isolate the communities in Robroyston, Provanmill, Germiston and Royston further.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons instruct that the Secretary of State for Scotland engages with First Bus and the Scottish Government to do all within his power to maintain the 19A bus service and to promote the creation of a free to use municipal bus service across the entire city of Glasgow. And the petitioners remain, etc.
Minerals Mining (Barford)

Motion made, and Question proposed, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mr Marcus Jones.)

8.40 pm

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): On a personal note, may I say, as you leave the Chair, Mr Speaker, that it has been a pleasure to serve briefly under you in this debate? I welcome the Deputy Speaker to his place.

I should clarify the issue I wish to raise this evening, as earlier today the Annunciators displayed the topic wrong, describing it as “mineral mining in Bradford”. I hope that the Minister has been duly informed that this is about mining in Barford, in my constituency. I do not want to disappoint anyone, but that is exactly what I will be speaking about.

This is not a parochial issue; it is an issue of principle, relating to a village, Barford, of 1,500 people in my constituency. It would be easy to consider that this is a one-off debate and issue, which may be parochial for that particular village, but it is about principle. Much of today, as with yesterday, last week and the months before, was spent discussing Brexit, and I am sure many people would like a break from that, but the issue I am about to elaborate on relates to environmental standards as much as it does anything else. Many of us on these Benches have been speaking out about how we wish to defend environmental protections and how important it is to us to ensure that they are maintained at the highest level and that we have dynamic alignment with European regulations.

The proposals are for the quarry site to be in a little hamlet called Wasperton, adjacent to the village of Barford. It has been identified by Warwickshire County Council as part of its minerals plan. The purpose of the site is the excavation of sand and gravel. For more than a year, I have been supporting the community in its campaign, because the site is huge. It almost dwarfs the village; the area is an area of approximately 85 hectares of arable farm land, about 50% of which is high-grade agricultural land—BMV, or best and most versatile”, land. The land is currently owned by St John’s College and the proposed quarry site would lie just 350 metres from the edge of the village of Barford. The location is important because, of the identified sites across the county of Warwickshire, site 4, near Barford, is the only one with a large village and a school nearby. Under the current plan, work at the quarry would take place just 350 metres from the southern edge of the village. The proposals are due to be submitted to the Planning Inspectorate for consideration in a few weeks’ time. We expect a report on the outcome of deliberations in spring 2020, and for the plan possibly to be scheduled for adoption in December 2020.

I recognise that there is a need for such minerals. For all authorities up and down the land, it is a challenge to find the sand and gravels needed for the construction industry. In its plan, Warwickshire County Council states that “the main issue for this plan to address is the shortfall in sand and gravel. Without adequate sand and gravel, there will not be enough aggregate to serve the construction industry in the County and the sub-region.” Of course, the premise for that is a calculation based on need, and assumptions are the basis of that calculation. Fundamental to that is how the calculation has been arrived at.

The construction of housing has already been identified as overstated. The local five-year housing supply figure identified 17,000 homes for construction in Warwick district, yet the Office for National Statistics forecasts a need for half that figure. There are other parts of the country where that overstatement is reflected, although maybe not to the same scale. That overstatement is a critical part of my argument, but there are also other issues to address.

There is the matter of access to the site. As the council’s plan states:

“Generally, mineral extraction sites are not approved if they require lorries to travel...on minor roads and centres of population including both towns and villages. Any site submissions with predicted transport/highway problems will be rejected unless it can be demonstrated that the issues can be satisfactorily mitigated.”

At the first public consultation stage, eight allocations were required, to deliver 8 million tonnes. Following a further decline in sales, the plan required only 6.5 million tonnes, which could be delivered through six allocations. The sites are spread geographically across Warwickshire, but two sites have been withdrawn—one much further to the south, nearer Stratford-upon-Avon, and another immediately south of the proposed site.

The council claims that the Wasperton site should serve Stratford-upon-Avon, Warwick and Leamington in terms of its development needs, but I am not convinced, and neither is the public. I would summarise the situation in the following points. First, there is an excess to the actual need for housing, as I have already pointed out; according to the ONS, there is an over-supply of houses. Secondly, the site is 350 metres from the village. Thirdly, there is the site’s proximity to the village school. The site is directly to the south of the village, so the village is threatened by dust and silicates blown over by prevailing winds, from the sand that would be excavated.

That fundamental question of whether the site is actually needed is perhaps the most concerning issue, but there is also the role of the landowner, St John’s College, Oxford. I wrote to the president in the late spring and I was not particularly pleased by the response I received. The college is the wealthiest in Oxford—it does not need the money. Why has it put forward this site for development, when it will be so harmful to the lives of all the residents—the children—of Barford and Wasperton? There was a disingenuous claim that it was making the land available for housing development; it was not. This land will be opened up and dug up. Despite being high-grade agricultural land, it will become an eyesore, open for the extraction of sand and gravel. Even the student body at St John’s College passed a motion to stand against the project. There is widespread concern and dismay that a college with the wealth of St John’s should be allowing this to happen. It does not need to be conceding to sell the land to allow this mining. The national planning policy framework states that MPAs should make provision for a sand and gravel landbank of at least seven years of permitted reserves, but, as I have already said, there is sufficient landbank. It currently stands at eight years, but the numbers in the calculation of how many houses are required do not suggest that it is needed at all.
So why do we need this material—not just the quantity of housing, as I have said, but the materials that are used themselves? The assumption is that we will continue to use sand and gravel in the same quantities as in the past, but that is not sustainable development. It is not sustainable for our environment, because sand and gravel in construction use so much energy—whether it be in the forging of bricks or other materials such as concrete and so on.

I stated that there are other concerns that relate to proximity. They are the concerns that the villages and communities have themselves. Essentially, it is about the dust emissions and the impact on residents’ health and on children’s health. Although the county council have proposed measures to reduce dust, they will not prevent the prevailing winds carrying dust over the village, and the proposals do not offer any guarantee that the quarry will not have negative health impacts. The dust from the quarry will contain silica, which can be extremely harmful to the elderly and to young children. As I said, with St Peter’s primary school so close by, 170 students will be put at particular risk.

At this point, I would like to remark on the fantastic campaigning work being done by the school. It sees the risks. It recognises the threats, and it is determined to ensure that this quarry is never realised. On that point about the toxicity of the air, the Environmental Working Group, which is a US-based body specialising in research and advocacy, says:

“None of the air quality standards for silica are adequate to protect people living or working near sand mining sites. The danger of airborne silica is especially acute for children...Silica air pollution has become a danger for residents near open sand mining and processing. Children, older adults and others with existing disease are especially at risk.”

When we talk about silicates and these very fine materials, we often think about PM10s and PM2.5s. The Minister and I have had exchanges in other debates about the threats of these particles to human health. I believe that she shares with me a real concern about the sort of environment—the air quality—that we should have, particularly for young people. These particulates remind us of those microfibres in asbestos and how damaging they are to our lungs, particularly to developing young lungs and other organs. These particulates should not be allowed to enter into the atmosphere, certainly not within a couple of hundred metres of a primary school.

The Environmental Working Group has concerns for residents living within 1,500 metres of any excavation site because of this dissipation of dust particles. The evidence that it has produced shows that silica levels measured near open sand mining in Wisconsin and Minnesota—there is no difference between those sites in that part of the world to those in the UK—were at least 10 times higher than the 3 micrograms per cubic metre, which is the recommended limit.

Let me turn to the infrastructure and its unsuitability, including the inadequacy of local highways, which cannot accommodate the development and the air pollution caused by 60 heavy goods vehicles accessing the site each day. There are also wider environmental issues—for example, the irreparable damage to high-grade farmland including versatile land, the 400-year-old hedgerows and trees, and three grade II listed properties, the closest of which is just 100 metres from the quarry site.

Let me mention the example of just one of the agribusinesses on this super high-grade farmland—a fine farm that produces top quality salad ingredients producing two crops a year. We have to protect such farm producers. The alternative is often to have these crops air freighted in from other countries, but we can produce them locally, and that should be encouraged and protected. The situation also gives rise to a social issue, as long-term farming tenants will be displaced as a result of any quarry.

The Government and the Minister should be aware that there have been more than 750 written letters of objection and a further 300 objections registered online—all opposing Warwickshire County Council’s plans. To put that in perspective, there are only 1,500 villagers. The campaign has been relentless and I commend the villagers for their work. I have been determined to support and stand by them throughout. I have written to the Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, and to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to raise planning concerns. I met the county council and many residents of the village of Barford. As I mentioned earlier, I also wrote to St John’s College itself.

The housing numbers on which this plan is predicated are wrong; they have been overstated. The Office for National Statistics has said that they are significantly higher than the required figures. We are assuming that we are going to be using sands and gravels in the same quantities as we ever did to construct housing and buildings in the same way that we have always done. But there is a revolution in the way in which housing is being built, so it is wrong to make that assumption.

I have mentioned the proximity of the proposed quarry site, which is just 350 metres from the village and a little bit further from the school. The huge issue of air toxicity needs to be addressed. In other countries, there is a legally established minimum exclusion zone. For example, the regulations in Canada state a minimum of 1,000 metres. Why are we not adopting that idea? These are the sort of standards that we should be including in the Environment Bill, and in how we consider our environmental practices should we leave the EU.

The community are clear in their demands. They want the Government to legislate to restrict the mining of mineral materials that release silica dust to sites that are a safe distance from residential areas, and they would like the minimum distance set at 1,000 metres. This is not difficult. It should be the sort of legislation that the Government are capable of introducing. This is the only site in the Warwickshire plan that is near to a large village and a school, which is why it should be excluded from Warwickshire County Council’s minerals plan. As I said, this land is high-grade farmland. We need high-grade farmland to produce the foods that we depend on so that we have food resilience in this country.

Finally, let me cite—I am sure the Minister will not mind—the Government’s own national planning policy framework, which, I remind her, according to DEFRA, seeks to protect the best and most versatile farmland. This is such a case. I ask her to intervene and ensure that this quarry is not allowed.

9 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): I congratulate the hon. Member for Warwick and Leamington (Matt Western)
Western) on bringing this debate to the House. I know that he cares about the environment. He took over from me on the all-party electric vehicles group, so we have a connection in caring about the environment, emissions and suchlike. He is right to raise issues that relate to his constituency.

I do, however, hope that the hon. Gentleman appreciates there is a due and proper process to be followed in the consideration of local planning, and that given the Secretary of State’s quasi-judicial role in the planning system, I am unable to comment on the detail of individual minerals local plans. I am sure he knew that I would say that. The Government are committed to ensuring the independence of the examination process for local plans, and local people must have confidence that the examination of local plans for their communities is fair and open, and that decisions are made impartially. I understand that Warwickshire County Council is proposing to submit the Warwickshire minerals plan to the Planning Inspectorate in the coming weeks. Therefore, neither I nor my right hon. and hon. Friends at the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government—with whom I know he has had many exchanges on this issue—are in a position to directly address the specific concerns raised by his constituents. Consideration of the Warwickshire minerals plan will be done in accordance with the planning system.

I am, however, happy to discuss the crucially important topic of protecting our constituents, local communities and the environment from any impacts of development. National planning policy and guidance requires mineral planning authorities to plan for a steady and adequate supply of aggregates, including crushed rock, sand and gravel, by designating specific sites, preferred areas or areas of search. Designating specific sites provides more certainty about when and where development will take place. However, I fully understand the concerns that people such as the residents of Barford have when development is proposed in their local area, particularly where these concerns include potential development that may result in environmental impacts on their communities, homes and businesses.

We therefore need to be sure that we have clear and strong environmental regulation and planning controls that work for the environment, for people and for business. As I am sure the hon. Gentleman is well aware, the Environment Agency and local planning authorities each have distinct roles with regard to pollution and planning controls to enable this to happen. Anyone with concerns must be confident that the system is designed to listen to those concerns. That is why all the steps of our planning system are supported by a public consultation process through which stakeholders may consider the proposals and voice any concerns they may have to the local planning authority. As we heard, over 1,000 people responded to Warwickshire’s minerals local plan consultation in 2018. Clearly, that is a large number of people for the small area of the village.

Once the local planning authority has prepared and consulted on a local plan, as Warwickshire has done, it is submitted to the Secretary of State, who will appoint an inspector to carry out an independent examination. This process is dealt with by the Planning Inspectorate. The examination will assess whether the plan has been prepared in accordance with the legal and procedural requirements and whether it is sound. The four tests of soundness are set out in the national planning policy framework.

Matt Western: I totally accept that process and how the cogs of local government and so on turn, but my question is actually around the assumptions. Those of us who are quite close to the changes in the whole construction industry and the sorts of housing that we will have in future would say, “Will we be requiring these materials in the same quantity as we have done in the past when modular housing and other forms of construction are coming through and therefore the dependence on and need for sand and gravel will be greatly reduced?”

Rebecca Pow: The hon. Gentleman makes a sound point, but that is all assumption, and we have no data. Councils have to work on data in preparing their five-year plan for housing allocation, as they have to with minerals. That is why we have a system for how these things work. They might change in future, but that is all just supposition, if I might be so bold as to say that.

The planning inspector will consider the evidence provided by the local planning authority to support the plan and any representations put forward by local people and other interested parties. The proposed allocation at Barford will be considered as part of that examination, and the inspector will take into account the issues and viewpoints raised in the representations made, including those from residents in Barford regarding the allocation at Wasperton farm. The residents can make the case about whether this amount of crushed gravel is needed right now, but the council has a process for deciding whether it wants to abide by that guidance.

Unfortunately, by its very nature, new development, whether it be housing or mineral extraction, will have some impact on the local environment. It is for that reason that there are clear and defined measures by which development proposals and their potential impact on residents, local communities and the environment are assessed. The national planning policy framework includes a requirement for local plans to be accompanied by a sustainability appraisal, which plays an important part in demonstrating that the local plan reflects sustainability objectives. That has to be taken into account.

The sustainability appraisal of the Warwickshire minerals plan incorporates a strategic environmental assessment, which included an assessment of the site allocation at Wasperton farm. A habitats regulations assessment was also undertaken, which considered the potential of significant effects on habitat sites or species located within Warwickshire and the vicinity. The proposed mineral local plan policy for the allocation at Wasperton farm includes a number of requirements in relation to access, environmental matters and phased restoration of the site. Those considerations will all need to be taken into account if individual planning applications are made.

Given that the proposed site allocation at Wasperton farm is pretty large—85 hectares—any future planning application for quarry activities will need to be accompanied by an environmental impact assessment. That process assesses the potential for environmental effects, including those to land, including agricultural land; air quality, which needs to be considered by the local authority against the local air quality plan; dust; the health of local residents; noise levels; transport; the landscape; and
local and long-distance views, which I understand was raised by the residents of Barford. It would be remiss of me not to highlight that the process also gives consideration to the potential positive impacts of such a development on the local economy, employment and suchlike.

Similar to the local plan-making process, the environmental impact assessment process requires consultation with stakeholders. That process will allow Warwickshire County Council to determine any planning application, should one be submitted. The local planning authority will also have the power to set conditions to which any approved application must adhere, and the local planning authority can take action if it is deemed that any condition is breached.

I fully appreciate that I have been unable to address the specific concerns raised by the hon. Gentleman and the residents of Barford, but it is right that he is raising those concerns on their behalf, as their Member of Parliament. That is the right thing to do, and I would probably do the same for the residents of Taunton Deane. I hope that my explanation of the planning and permitting system and the measures by which we seek to manage any potential environmental impacts has provided some reassurance.

Question put and agreed to.

9.9 pm

House adjourned.
House of Commons

Wednesday 30 October 2019

The House met at half-past Eleven o'clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Speaker's Statement

Mr Speaker: Order. It will be for the convenience of Members to be aware that, unusually, our House photographer will take several photos from the Bar of the House and from behind the Chair today, tomorrow and, as appropriate, on Monday.

BUSINESS BEFORE QUESTIONS

SESSIONAL RETURNS

Ordered,
That there be laid before the House Returns for Session 2017-19 of information and statistics relating to:

1. Business of the House
2. Closure of Debate, Proposal of Question and Allocation of Time (including Programme Motions)
3. Sittings of the House
4. Private Bills and Private Business
5. Public Bills
6. Delegated Legislation and Legislative Reform Orders
7. European Legislation, etc
8. Grand Committees
9. Panel of Chairs
10. Select Committees.—(The Chairman of Ways and Means).

Oral Answers to Questions

NORTHERN IRELAND

The Secretary of State was asked—

Armed Forces Veterans

1. Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): What steps his Department is taking to support armed forces veterans in Northern Ireland. [900143]

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Julian Smith): Before I begin, may I pay tribute to you, Mr Speaker, on what I believe is—I am not sure—your penultimate day in the Chair? As I have said before, despite the odd disagreement in my past life as Government Chief Whip, your energy, drive and commitment to this role has been without parallel. I hope you will indulge me if I also pay tribute to two other departing Members with a strong interest in Northern Ireland: first, the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who has served his constituents with good grace for over 20 years and clearly cares deeply about Northern Ireland and its people; and secondly, my ministerial colleague my right hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), who has been in indispensable to me since I took over this role. He has been critical in driving forward preparations for Northern Ireland’s exit from the EU, and also in his tireless work for the victims of the Grenfell Tower fire. I would also like to wish all colleagues who are leaving Parliament my best wishes; as Chief Whip, I saw at first hand how tough this period of political history has been for all colleagues.

The UK Government are fully committed to the covenant. A veterans strategy was published last year and a consultation event held in Belfast in conjunction with the veterans support office. I am now working closely with colleagues to develop a comprehensive response to that consultation so that we can ensure that every veteran receives the support they need and the recognition they deserve.

Sir Henry Bellingham: I thank the Secretary of State for that reply, but when is the pursuit of brave Northern Ireland veterans and former members of the security services going to come to an end? Is the Secretary of State aware that the Ministry of Defence supports a presumption against prosecution when a case has already been fully investigated, unless there is new evidence? May I urge him to support that proposal and make it an election pledge?

Julian Smith: My hon. Friend will be aware that there is a consultation going on, as he has referred to. The Northern Ireland Office is looking at the Northern Ireland challenges on legacy. These are very sensitive issues—the system is not working, and we will be reporting back to this House over the coming weeks.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): May I, on behalf of my party, extend our best wishes to the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) and the Minister of State, to the right hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), who has been incredibly helpful to me on a particular issue and, indeed, to the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), who has been a recurring strong voice for Northern Ireland?

The Secretary of State said three weeks ago that no party in Northern Ireland would have a veto, yet Sinn Féin used its veto on the extension of the armed forces covenant in Northern Ireland; it does not apply in whole or in part, because of Sinn Féin’s sectarian intransigence. Will the Secretary of State keenly pursue the full implementation of the covenant in Northern Ireland?

Julian Smith: The Government are committed to the armed forces covenant. As I said, we are engaging with the consultation that has occurred. We are clear on our responsibilities; the covenant is working across Northern Ireland, but we obviously need to ensure that it is working as efficiently and productively as possible for members of the armed forces.

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): In the 30 years since I attended the Remembrance service at Enniskillen after the tragedy and atrocity there, there has been recognition of the service by nationalists, Catholics and Irish people in the great war and in the second world war. Will my right hon. Friend do all he can to encourage the joint remembrance of a joint sacrifice?
Julian Smith: I will be joining Remembrance Day in Enniskillen in a week or so, and I will be thinking of all the people who have contributed in the way that my hon. Friend refers to.

Anna Soubry (Broxtowe) (IGC): Further to the question from the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), may I gently say to the Secretary of State—and I apologise for all the grief I have given him over the past few years—that, on this very important matter, when I was the Veterans Minister I had the great honour of visiting Northern Ireland, and I have to say to him that the covenant, which the coalition Government did so much to advance in that time, has just not happened in Northern Ireland, and it is because of sectarian differences? That is not fair, and those in Northern Ireland must have exactly the same rights under the covenant as those in the rest of the United Kingdom.

Julian Smith: I thank the right hon. Lady for her question and pay tribute to her for the work she did in that role. I am aware that there is more to do, which is why we have been consulting on how the covenant is being implemented. There are things to improve, and we will make sure that we improve them.

MLAs’ Salaries

2. Maria Caulfield (Lewes) (Con): What plans the Government have to make a further decision on the salaries paid to Members of the Northern Ireland Assembly.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Julian Smith): It is deeply frustrating that there has been no functioning Assembly for so long. MLAs’ pay is deeply controversial, but they are doing important constituency work. I have said that I will review MLA pay, and I am currently doing that.

Maria Caulfield: I echo the sentiments about colleagues who are leaving, in particular my fellow Northern Ireland Affairs Committee member, the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), who has stood up for Northern Ireland.

At the Select Committee last week it was revealed that the cost of MLA salaries has reached over £15 million since the Assembly was dissolved. MLAs do good constituency work, but is it not time to use that mechanism as a tool to get the Assembly back up and running?

Julian Smith: My hon. Friend is right that this is a challenge. It is a controversial amount of money, but in my view we have to do everything we can to encourage the political parties in Northern Ireland to come together. We need to review pay, but we also need to encourage the Assembly to get up and running.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): There is a lot of talk about reducing the salaries of MLAs, but I am sure the Secretary of State will agree with me that many MLAs work hard in their constituencies to provide constituency services through their offices. That is an important factor.

Julian Smith: My hon. Friend is right. The quality of political leadership and the quality of MLAs is high. We need all MLAs to come together and get going in the interests of Northern Ireland.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I should like the Secretary of State to explain to the people of Northern Ireland why he is still dithering about cutting the salaries of MLAs. He cannot possibly justify continuing to pay MLAs almost £36,000 a year each during the next five years, and the general election campaign will bring no expectation of the Assembly being restored. For goodness’ sake, give the people of Northern Ireland some good news. Cut their salaries and do not dither.

Julian Smith: The hon. Lady is being tough on me. At the Select Committee the other day I committed to doing a review as a result of her question, and I am doing that review.

Leaving the EU: Peace in Northern Ireland

3. Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): What recent assessment he has made of the effect on peace in Northern Ireland of the UK leaving the EU.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Julian Smith): Northern Ireland’s security situation has been transformed as a result of the peace process. Although the threat from Northern Ireland-related terrorism continues to be assessed as severe, hard work by the Police Service of Northern Ireland and others means that most people are not affected. Challenges remain and will continue after EU exit, but Northern Ireland is a place where people want to work, study and live free from the threat or use of violence.

Alex Cunningham: The Prime Minister will spend the next several weeks trying to sell his damaging Brexit deal in Northern Ireland, among other places. The Chief Constable of the PSNI believes that that deal could lead to an increase in violence and civil unrest. What additional funding will the Secretary of State commit to community policing in Northern Ireland to help him cope?

Julian Smith: The PSNI has received additional funding in the run-up to Brexit. I remain in constant touch with the Chief Constable, and I will ensure that the funding and resourcing they need to do their job, which they do day in, day out to protect the citizens of Northern Ireland, is there.

Mr Owen Paterson (North Shropshire) (Con): There is widespread disquiet among Unionists about the proposed deal, because of the concept of a border down the Irish sea. Does my right hon. Friend agree that when the UK comes out of the interim period and has a free trade agreement, Northern Ireland can have absolute equal status with the whole of the rest of the UK if mutual enforcement is introduced both north and south of the border? That would get rid of the need for a border between Northern Ireland and the Republic of Ireland, and a border down the Irish sea.

Julian Smith: I thank my right hon. Friend for his question. The Government, through this deal, are ensuring that the United Kingdom comes out of the EU as a whole. On east-west trade, we are doing everything we can to ensure that there will be unfettered access to the GB market and no barriers to that trade.
10. [900153] Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): How many of the Government’s additional 20,000 police officers have been allocated to Northern Ireland, and what flexibility is there if the security situation deteriorates in the light of the deal?

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Julian Smith): The withdrawal agreement is clear that the UK Government are committed to protecting Northern Ireland’s position in the UK internal market, and we have guaranteed that Northern Irish businesses and farmers will continue to have unfettered access to the rest of the UK market. When the withdrawal agreement comes back, those clauses on unfettered access between Northern Ireland and Great Britain will be in it. Businesses in Northern Ireland will benefit from tariff-free access to the UK single market while also benefiting from future trade deals negotiated with the UK.

Mr Carmichael: It is one of the defining characteristics of a nation state that goods moving into a territory are subject to regulations that are not there for goods that move within it. That is why the withdrawal agreement is a threat to the future of the Union that is the United Kingdom. It is why the former Prime Minister was absolutely right to discount completely the possibility of a customs border down the Irish sea. Why has the Conservative and Unionist party changed its mind?

Julian Smith: As the right hon. Gentleman knows, the key priority was to maintain no hard border on the island of Ireland—the thing that has ensured peace there for the last few decades. As I said, we will deliver on the commitments in the protocol on unfettered access for NI businesses into the GB market.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): If there are to be east-west arrangements, may I press my right hon. Friend to try to ensure that they are cost-neutral for Northern Irish business?

Julian Smith: I am having proactive discussions with the Treasury, and I agree that we need to have no costs and no barriers for Northern Ireland business.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): In the light of that answer, how does a Unionist Secretary of State justify export declarations on £18.5 billion-worth of trade flowing from Northern Ireland to Great Britain, and what charge will be placed on that £18.5 billion-worth of trade?

Julian Smith: Through this agreement, the United Kingdom maintains total control of how that is applied. As my hon. Friend knows, we are working day in, day out to ensure that Northern Irish businesses can send their goods from Northern Ireland to Great Britain with absolutely unfettered access.

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): May I return to the question asked by my right hon. Friend the Member for North Shropshire (Mr Paterson)? Could we not consider the mutual recognition and mutual implementation proposals in much the same way as we administer the common travel area?

Julian Smith: Over the coming weeks, and then when we enter the implementation period, we will do everything we can to deliver on the commitment that I have just made to unfettered access for goods travelling from Northern Ireland to Great Britain, and ensure that trade can continue as it is now.

Customs Regulations

4. Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What steps the Government have taken to ensure that customs regulations are the same in Northern Ireland as in the rest of the UK.

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Julian Smith): The withdrawal agreement is clear that the UK Government are committed to protecting Northern Ireland’s position in the UK internal market, and we have guaranteed that Northern Irish businesses and farmers will continue to have unfettered access to the rest of the UK market. When the withdrawal agreement comes back, those clauses on unfettered access between Northern Ireland and Great Britain will be in it. Businesses in Northern Ireland will benefit from tariff-free access to the UK single market while also benefiting from future trade deals negotiated with the UK.

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Customs Regulations

4. Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): What steps the Government have taken to ensure that customs regulations are the same in Northern Ireland as in the rest of the UK.
Northern Ireland in the UK

5. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What assessment he has made of the benefits to Northern Ireland of being part of the UK. [900147]

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Scotland (Mr Robin Walker): As part of the world’s sixth largest economy, Northern Ireland benefits from sharing resources to fund public spending on defence, education and health, and from access to the UK’s unique international networks. It also benefits from the Government’s UK-wide policies, including recent increases in the national living wage and the personal allowance. As Conservatvives and Unionists, we should always support the Union and Northern Ireland’s place within it.

6. Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Has an economic assessment been made of the potential effect of the Government’s proposed withdrawal agreement on Northern Ireland.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Nick Hurd): In my last questions, may I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his over-generous remarks and associate myself with his kind words about my north-west London neighbour, the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound)? I should also like to thank you, Mr Speaker, for your support over many years in the Chair. Under the proposed agreement, all businesses will continue to trade across the north-south border without tariffs or new regulatory checks. Businesses in Northern Ireland will continue to benefit from tariff-free access to the UK’s single market while having the opportunity to benefit from any future trade deals negotiated by the UK after we leave the EU.

Marion Fellows: Has an economic assessment been prepared to illustrate how much of a competitive advantage Northern Ireland will gain from effectively remaining in
the EU’s customs union and single market, compared with other businesses across the rest of the UK? If so, will the Minister publish it?

Mr Hurd: I draw the hon. Lady’s attention to the impact assessment. I do not recognise her comments about competitive advantage or disadvantage. I hope that she will recognise that the circumstances in relation to Northern Ireland are special because of the land border, and that the proposed agreement responds to those special characteristics.

Patrick Grady: The Foreign Secretary has described the deal as “cracking” for Northern Ireland. It stands to reason, then, that the deal must be less cracking for the rest of the UK. Why is Northern Ireland getting special treatment when it voted to remain, while Scotland, which also voted to remain, is having to take the bad hard Brexit that the Tories are so determined to push through?

Mr Hurd: I understand, I think, the point the hon. Gentleman makes, but I return to what I was saying. He knows that the circumstances in Northern Ireland are special in relation to our exit from the EU because of the existence of the land border and because of the importance that we all attach to the Belfast/Good Friday agreement. One of the great achievements of this new proposed withdrawal agreement is the removal of the need for a hard border.

David Morris (Morecambe and Lunesdale) (Con): Heysham in my constituency is the nearest mainland UK port to Northern Ireland. Does the Minister agree that my area could be a boomtown if we had a free port, as 10% of the north-west’s GDP comes in through our port, and it will be 20% once this withdrawal agreement has been finalised?

Mr Hurd: I congratulate my hon. Friend on his creativity in introducing that point, which I am sure will have been heard by the relevant Secretary of State. He raises an important point about the opportunity and need to talk up the UK economy and to talk up the opportunities to increase business and trade links across the UK internal market once we leave the EU.

Welfare Mitigation Payments

7. Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): If he will bring forward legislative proposals to maintain welfare mitigation payments in Northern Ireland after March 2020.

8. Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): If he will bring forward legislative proposals to maintain welfare mitigation payments in Northern Ireland after March 2020.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Nick Hurd): The mitigations in place were agreed by the previous Northern Ireland Executive and are sunsetted in March 2020. Ministers here in Westminster do not have the power to instruct the Northern Ireland civil service to take action or to direct spending in relation to devolved matters. Any extension of those mitigations will be a matter for the Northern Ireland civil service and restored Executive Ministers.

Steve McCabe: I am—[ Interruption. ] I am sure that the people of Selly Oak would like the welcome that the Prime Minister just received.

In view of the importance of this issue, will the Minister consider amending the Bill, because it is clear that if the people of Northern Ireland face this welfare cliff edge, there will be major problems from March next year?

Mr Hurd: This is an incredibly serious issue. Thousands of people in Northern Ireland benefit from these mitigations, and there is a sunset provision for the end of March 2020. The hon. Gentleman will know that alternative mechanisms are available to the devolved Administration to extend the mitigations, but that is not ideal. The best way would be to change the legal framework, which is best done in Northern Ireland by a Northern Ireland Executive, and the day when it is restored cannot come too soon.

Frank Field: Does the Minister agree that many families in Northern Ireland are particularly affected by the Government’s policy to cap benefits for families with more than two children? When he next sees the Prime Minister, will he ask for the lifting of the cap, which affects poor children throughout the whole United Kingdom, to be part of his election manifesto?

Mr Hurd: I understand the right hon. Gentleman’s point, and the Prime Minister has heard it directly.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson) indicated assent.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): The introduction of universal credit has had a devastating impact in my constituency, but women in Northern Ireland who wish to access an exemption to the two-child limit, known as the rape clause, may still be subject to criminal prosecution for not reporting under the Criminal Law Act (Northern Ireland) 1967, as confirmed by the Director of Public Prosecutions for Northern Ireland. Will the Secretary of State commit to lifting the two-child limit that places families into further hardship?

Mr Hurd: That is an extremely important and sensitive issue. The hon. Lady will know that, in practice, there have been no prosecutions under section 5 of the 1967 Act in the past 50 years. She will also know about the guidance from the Attorney General and from the outgoing DPP, particularly on the status of public interest. I come back to the same old riff: any change in the law is for a devolved Executive and a devolved Administration. This is a serious issue, so it is about time elected politicians in Northern Ireland stepped up to their responsibility.

Gavin Newlands (Paisley and Renfrewshire North) (SNP): When giving evidence to the Scottish Parliament, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster confirmed that Northern Irish businesses will have better access to...
the EU single market than Scottish businesses. Shamefully, this Government will not publish an economic assessment of the Prime Minister’s deal, but we know from independent research that it will hit Scotland hard. Will the Minister therefore ask the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, who is sitting next to him, whether Scotland’s man in the Cabinet demanded that Scotland’s businesses be given the same access to the single market and customs union as Northern Irish business, or did he sit there meekly, abandoning them to their fate?

Mr Hurd: The Government have published an impact assessment in relation to the proposed withdrawal agreement, and we have rehearsed the arguments about the arrangements in Northern Ireland. These are Northern Ireland questions, and I am sure that the Secretary of State has heard the hon. Gentleman’s comments.

PRIME MINISTER

The Prime Minister was asked—

Engagements

Q1. [900228] Dr Alan Whitehead (Southampton, Test) (Lab): If he will list his official engagements for Wednesday 30 October.

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): Immediately after questions today, I will open the debate on the Grenfell Tower inquiry report.

Mr Speaker, I know that the whole House will want to join me in recording that, after 10 tumultuous years, this is your last Prime Minister’s questions. As befits a distinguished former Wimbledon competitor, you have sat up there in your high chair not just as an umpire ruthlessly adjudicating on the finer points of parliamentary procedure with your trademark Tony Montana scowl, not just as a commentator offering your own opinions on the rallies you are watching—sometimes acerbic and sometimes kind—but above all as a player in your own right, peppering every part of the Chamber with your own thoughts and opinions like some uncontrollable tennis-ball machine delivering a series of literally unplayable and formally unreturnable volleys and smashes.

Although we may disagree about some of the legislative innovations you have favoured, there is no doubt in my mind that you have been a great servant of this Parliament and this House of Commons. You have modernised, you have widened access, you have cared for the needs of those with disabilities, and you have cared so deeply for the rights of Back Benchers that you have done more than anyone since Stephen Hawking to stretch time in this session. As we come to the end of what must be the longest retirement since Frank Sinatra’s, I am sure the whole House will join me in thanking you and hoping that you enjoy in your retirement the soothing medicament that you have so often prescribed to the rest of us.

I know that Members across the House will want to join me in wishing the England rugby team the very best for the final in the world cup on Saturday.

This morning I had meetings with ministerial colleagues and others. In addition to my duties in the House, I shall have further such meetings later today.

Dr Whitehead: I fully associate myself with the Prime Minister’s comments about your outstanding service, Mr Speaker, and wish you a long and successful life after your speakership comes to an end.

Labour will produce a strong offer at the forthcoming election on the climate emergency and net zero, including a full ban on the extraction of fossil fuel by fracking. What chance does the Prime Minister think he has of matching that offer, particularly in the light of the news that the Conservative manifesto will be written by a lobbyist for the fracking industry?

The Prime Minister: We will shortly make an announcement about fracking in this country, in view of the considerable anxieties that are legitimately being raised about the earthquakes that have followed various fracking attempts in the UK. We will certainly follow up on those findings, because they are very important and will be of concern to Members across the House.

But I must say that this Government yield to nobody in our enthusiasm for reducing CO₂. We have cut carbon emissions massively in the UK and we were the first European country to commit to net zero by 2050, and that is what we are going to do. We can do it because we believe in a strong, dynamic, robust market economy that is delivering the solutions in clean technology that are deployed by the Labour party.

Q3. [900230] Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): On behalf of those on the Conservative Benches, may I wish my right hon. Friend the best of good fortune in the 12 December general election?

While we live in a period of some uncertainty, there are 426 people who have thalidomide and very much rely on the health grant to give them dignity, care and support. That grant comes to an end in a few years’ time. As chairman of the thalidomide APPG, and on behalf of those 426 recipients, I urge my right hon. Friend to end their uncertainty as soon as possible by signalling a renewal of that grant. That would give them the peace of mind that, I hope, the whole House agrees, they most certainly deserve.

The Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend on everything he does for his constituents and the thalidomide victims. I reassure him that the current health grant, which as he rightly says is subject to review in 2023, will be reviewed. I am getting confirmation of that from my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Health. I hope that my hon. Friend will pass those assurances to the thalidomide victims as fast as he can.

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I hope you will indulge me one moment while a say a word about you—I am sure you will. I want to thank you for the way you have used your speakership over your decade-long tenure. You have done so much to reform this House of Commons, and our democracy is stronger for the way you have done it.

You have served for 10 years. You have given real power to Back Benchers, vastly expanded the use of urgent questions, which has been overwhelmingly popular with all Ministers, and opened up the number of emergency debates, which is even more popular with even more Ministers. In the traditions of the great Speaker Lenthall and others, you have stood up for Parliament when it
has to be stood up for, and we thank you for that. You have also carried that message internationally in terms of the role of parliamentary democracy and Parliaments holding Governments to account. As we hope to form a Government in the future, we hope to be held to account by Parliament as well.

I also think, and I am sure the whole House would agree with me, that you have done excellent work in opening up Parliament to visitors, exhibitions and children. You have reduced some of the strange customs and strange garments that people wear in this building—\[Interruption.\] It’s all right. I know you are all jealous of my tie, but it is okay. You have used your office to increase diversity among the staff in the House and make this a much more LGBT-friendly place. You have taken it from being a gentlemen’s club that happens to be in a royal palace to being a genuinely democratic institution.

I want you to accept our thanks and pass on our best wishes to Sally, Freddie, Oliver and Jemima, your wonderful family, for the support they have given you. There will be a great celebration today—I am sure the whole House will join us in this—when you and I celebrate Arsenal beating Liverpool tonight. \[Interruption.\] The Labour party loves a debate and loves a bit of banter.

The Prime Minister’s planned sell-out deal with Donald Trump means yet more national health service money being siphoned off into private profit. Channel 4’s “Dispatches” reported that the cost of drugs and medicines has repeatedly been discussed between United States and United Kingdom trade representatives. Why did the Prime Minister previously say the health service was not on the table in any post-Brexit trade deal?

**The Prime Minister:** The answer to that is very simple: it is because it is not on the table. I pay tribute to the Prime Minister’s planned trade deal. The US has met US pharmaceutical companies five times as part of that figure dropped to 20 and then finally dropped to six.

We learned this week that Government officials have met US pharmaceutical companies five times as part of the Prime Minister’s planned trade deal. The US has called for “full market access” to our NHS, which would mean prices of some of our most important medicines increasing by up to sevenfold. While the Government are having secret meetings with US corporations, it is patients here who continue to suffer. Can the Prime Minister explain why the number of people waiting longer for urgent cancer treatment has tripled over the past nine years?

**The Prime Minister:** As the right hon. Gentleman knows very well, this Government are investing £34 billion in the NHS. We are seeing improvements in cancer survival rates throughout the country, thanks to the investment that the Government are making. I think it is absolutely satirical that he should claim credit for getting Orkambi and other drugs delivered at a reasonable price; that is the work of the UK Government and the NHS, supporting the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence to ensure that people in this country get affordable treatments. He may not be aware of it, but Vertex, the company that makes Orkambi, comes from America. Is he seriously suggesting that the NHS should not engage in negotiations to ensure that British patients get the drugs they deserve? Is he so phobic of American companies that he would forbid the NHS from having those discussions?

**Jeremy Corbyn:** Not for the first time, the Prime Minister is talking nonsense. Of course we need to import medicines from various places; I just want it to be done in an open and transparent way. I do not want secret talks between Government officials, on behalf of Ministers, and big pharma corporations in the USA.

Last year, 34,000 cancer patients waited more than two months for treatment. Although early detection is obviously very important, the longer people wait, the less chance there is of their surviving cancer. The Prime Minister knows that, I know that, the whole world knows that—why can he not get it, and put the necessary resources into the NHS to cut the waiting times?

**The Prime Minister rose—**

**Jeremy Corbyn:** If he could just be patient for 30 seconds.

The Prime Minister claims that the NHS is safe in his hands; why, then, has NHS privatisation doubled under this Government, with nearly £10 billion being spent on private companies in our NHS?

**The Prime Minister:** The NHS is receiving unrivalled and unprecedented sums of taxpayers’ money. If the right hon. Gentleman is seriously saying that he would not like dentists, opticians and Macmillan care nurses to work with the NHS, he must be out of his mind. Cancer survival rates have actually increased year on year since 2010, and more and more people are seen within the right waiting time, thanks to the investments that we are making. I think he should pay tribute to the hard work of NHS staff, stop talking down their incredible achievements, and recognise that if we are allowed to come back as the next Government, we will invest massively in the NHS and take it forward with the funds that we will make available from a strong and growing economy. The reality is that he would wreck that economy.

**Jeremy Corbyn:** What we do not want is private companies like Virgin Care suing our NHS for contracts that they did not get. Our NHS should be focused on making people better, not making the wealthy few richer.
National health service A&E departments have just had their worst September on record. This morning, the Royal College of Emergency Medicine said that this winter the NHS needs more than 4,000 extra beds. Will the Prime Minister explain why, under his Government, the number of people in England waiting for an operation has now reached a record high of 4.4 million?

The Prime Minister: There is a reason why more people are receiving NHS care: it is that the NHS is working harder and achieving more than ever before. If the House wants to see what Labour would be like in office, it should look at its performance. By the way, I should say that the SNP Government negotiated a much higher price for Orkambi in Scotland. [Interruption.] They did. They got the price totally wrong. The Leader of the Opposition should have a word with them.

If the people of this country want a horrific foretaste of what life would be like under a Labour-run NHS, they should look at the NHS in Wales where all health targets are routinely missed, where the A&E waiting target has not been met since 2008; and where the target for in-patients and out-patients has not been met since August 2010. The right hon. Gentleman talks about cancer treatment—that target has not been met since June 2008. That is how Labour runs the NHS.

Jeremy Corbyn: I am surprised that the Prime Minister can keep a straight face saying that, while his Government have cut so much from the Welsh Government’s budget. And that from a Government who have cut 15,000 beds from the NHS and who have cut £7 billion from social care. I do not know how he has the brass neck to say what he has just said. The reality is that his words are hollow. That is clear to anyone who has tried to get a GP appointment, who sees how overworked our NHS staff are when they visit a hospital and who sees the stress that NHS staff go through when they cannot deal with all the patients who are coming in. He needs to think about this.

Let me give an example. A lady called Gillian wrote to me this week. [HON. MEMBERS: “Ah!”] Yes, it is a real case of a real person, and I will quote her letter if I may. Mr Speaker: Gillian says:

“My mother died in February as a direct result of the GP shortage in the UK. Her last years were marred by long waits for treatments and for interventions... Whenever she got care, it was given by overstretched but dedicated people, but it always came after painful and debilitating delays.”

Why should that happen to Gillian’s mum or anybody else’s mum? The problem is the shortage of GPs, the shortage of nurses and the excessive waiting time for people with very difficult conditions and deep pain. They should be sympathised with and supported.

The Prime Minister: I can certainly say that we will deal with the concerns of the right hon. Gentleman’s constituent Gillian, but I can tell him that there are 17,300 more doctors and over 17,000 more nurses on our wards since 2010. Frankly, it is time to differentiate the politics of protest and the politics of leadership. He should apologise for continually striking attitudes that I do not think are in the interests of the people. It is all very easy to be an Islingtonian protester and say that you side with Russia over what happened in Salisbury, or say that you have a £196 billion programme of renationalisation, or continually flip-flop one way or the other—now leave, now remain—refusing to respect the verdict of the people in the EU referendum. Leadership means standing up for the people of this country, standing up for our police, standing up for our NHS and making sure that it gets the funding that it needs, and standing up for our economy and for our wealth creators. Above all, it means getting Brexit done and ending the dither and delay. The time for protest is over. It is time for leadership, and that is what this Government provide.

Jeremy Corbyn: Coming from a Prime Minister who withdrew his own Bill, that seems a bit odd. My question was about somebody whose mother had died and who believes that that is because of the shortage of staff within the NHS. I had hoped that the Prime Minister would have shown some empathy and answered that question, because GP numbers are falling, there is a 43,000-nurse shortage in the NHS, and the NHS has suffered the longest spending squeeze ever in its history. The choice at this election could not be clearer. People have a chance to vote for real change after years of Conservative and Lib Dem cuts, privatisation and tax handouts for the richest. This Government have put our NHS into crisis, and this election is a once-in-a-generation chance to end privatisation in our NHS, give it the funding it needs and give it the doctors, nurses, GPs and all the other staff it needs. Despite the Prime Minister’s denials, our NHS is up for grabs by US corporations in a Trump-style trade deal. Is it not the truth—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. The right hon. Gentleman will not be shouted down under any circumstances. He will complete his inquiry to the satisfaction of the Chair, and people who think otherwise will quickly learn that they are, as usual, wrong.

Jeremy Corbyn: Despite the Prime Minister’s denials, the NHS is up for grabs by US corporations in a Trump trade deal. Is it not the truth—the Government may not like this—that this Government are preparing to sell off our NHS? Our health service is in more danger than at any other time in its glorious history because of the Prime Minister’s Government, his attitudes and the trade deals that he wants to strike.

The Prime Minister: I do indeed agree that there is a stark choice facing this country at this election, and one of the options is economic catastrophe under the Labour party, with a £196 billion programme that will take money away from companies and spend it on a pointless renationalisation programme. Labour will put up taxes on corporations, on people, on pensions and on businesses—to the highest level in the whole of Europe. That is the economic catastrophe that the Leader of the Opposition offers. But it is worse than that because he also offers a political disaster, consigning next year, which should be a wonderful year for our country, to two more referendums: another referendum on the EU because he cannot make up his mind what he thinks, flip-flopping this way and that; and another referendum on Scottish independence. Why on earth should the people of this country spend the next year, which should be a glorious year, going through the toxic, tedious torpor of two more referendums thanks to the Labour party?
We want next year to be a great year for our country. We are going to invest more in frontline NHS services. We are going to reduce violent crime, with 20,000 more police officers on our streets. That is what I pledged on the steps of Downing Street, and we have done it. We are going to invest in every one of our primary and secondary schools across the country. That is what I pledged on the steps of Downing Street, and we are delivering it. We are going to invest in a fantastic infrastructure programme for our country, with gigabit broadband across the whole nation. That is what I pledged on the steps of Downing Street, and that is what we are going to deliver. And we are going to deliver a fantastic deal by which this country will come out of the European Union—a deal that the Leader of the Opposition has tried to block but which we will deliver. That is the future for this country: drift and dither under the Labour party, or taking Britain forward to a brighter future under the Conservatives. That is the choice this country faces.

Hon. Members: More!

Mr Speaker: Order. I call Bob Blackman; I am sure he is delighted to be so popular.

Q6. [900233] Bob Blackman (Harrow East) (Con): For more than 30 years, the Royal National Orthopaedic Hospital in Stanmore was promised a rebuild. Under a Conservative Government, we have the first phase of those medical facilities, to match the world-class treatment provided by the medical team there. However, there are two problems. The first is that the next phase is caught up in NHS bureaucracy, and the second is that two eminent non-executive directors have sadly been dismissed from the board. Can my right hon. Friend sweep both of these problems under the carpet?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend on everything he does to campaign for his constituents, and particularly for the hospital in Stanmore. I assure him that that hospital, along with many others, will be in line for the funding that it requires. On his specific point about the administration at that hospital, I will ask my right hon. Friend the Health Secretary to deal with his concerns very speedily.

Ian Blackford (Ross, Skye and Lochaber) (SNP): Can I, Mr Speaker, on behalf of those of us on the SNP Benches, wish you all the best for your impending retirement and salute you, Sir, for the way that you have stood up for the democracy of this House in order that at this time of crisis we hold the Government to account? We trust that you will enjoy your many passions in retirement. You will always be welcome up in Scotland to see the mighty Hibernian. Let me, Mr Speaker, wish England all the best for the rugby on Saturday.

This Prime Minister’s extreme Brexit will take a wrecking ball to the economy and cost Scotland and the United Kingdom £70 billion a year. [Interruption.] We talk about the impact of Brexit and the Conservatives howl and complain, because they know the reality is that it is going to damage people’s lives. Is it not the truth that this Prime Minister is willing to throw Scotland under his big red bus to deliver his Brexit, no matter what the cost?

The Prime Minister: As the right hon. Gentleman knows very well, the greatest damage that could be done to the Scottish economy would be the SNP’s reckless plan to break up the Union with the UK. Sixty per cent. of Scotland’s exports are with the rest of the UK. They would be throwing away not just the biggest block grant in history that Scotland has ever received, but, of course, all the benefits of membership of the most successful political partnership in history, from shipbuilding in Govan to the Glasgow climate change summit next year, which will be a glory of our whole United Kingdom and which is coming to Scotland precisely because Scotland is part of the United Kingdom. They would throw all that away with their crackpot plan for borders at Berwick and creating a new Scottish currency or joining the euro; and, worse still, going into the European Union and handing back control of Scotland’s fisheries—Scotland’s spectacular marine wealth. Just at the moment that they have been won back by this country, they would hand back control of those fisheries to Brussels. That is their policy; I look forward to contesting it at the barricades.

Ian Blackford: You know, Mr Speaker, I thought it was Prime Minister’s questions, not a rant from the Prime Minister. I have to say—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Mr Kerr, I am seriously worried about your condition—calm yourself, man. [Interruption] Mr Grant, I am very concerned for you. Calm down.

Ian Blackford: Well, I certainly wish Mr Grant all the best for his future, because he is not coming back, like so many of the Scottish Conservatives. We hear that the Prime Minister will be coming up to Scotland in the election campaign. He will be welcome, because each time he comes to Scotland he drives up SNP support. Scotland did not vote for Brexit and we will not have it forced upon us. Is it not clear that the Scottish National party is the only party standing up for Scotland’s interests and respecting our democratic decision to remain in the European Union? This coming election will be one of the most important in Scotland’s history. Only a vote for the SNP can secure the escape route for Scotland away from this Brexit mess, from the chaos of Westminster and from the austerity of the Tories, and protect Scotland’s right to choose our own future as an independent country in Europe.

The Prime Minister: I am sorry if I seemed to rant at the right hon. Gentleman, but if I may say so, he does rant quite a lot about independence for Scotland—he bangs on about it endlessly. Why does he go on about Scottish independence so much? It is because he wants to conceal what the SNP Government are actually doing in Scotland. They are wrecking it. They are diabolical for the Scottish economy. They have the highest taxes in the UK. They are not running either health or education well. That is why they are so monomaniacl about independence and smashing the Union.

There are some wonderful things happening in Scotland, and it is very often thanks to Scottish Conservatives, who are delivering £200 million for Scottish farmers—that is all thanks to the intercessions of Scottish Conservatives.
—as part of the biggest ever block grant from London to Scotland. It is Scottish Conservatives who can be relied upon, unlike any other party in Scotland—unlike Labour or the SNP—to keep the Union together: the most successful political partnership in history.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. The House must calm itself. The truth is that one person’s rant is another person’s stream of passionate and uninterrupted eloquence.

Q7. [900234] Mr Nigel Evans (Ribble Valley) (Con): Mr Speaker, as your former Deputy Speaker, I want to say that nobody who has sat in that Chair has done more to defend and promote the rights of LGBTI people in this country and throughout the world. When so many people live in fear of being born the way they are, I salute you. Thank you.

The Guardian reported last week that the largest number of happy people live in the Ribble valley, and I believe that the Prime Minister has the capacity to make them happier. Will he ensure that Ribble Valley gets its fair share of the 153 extra police who are coming to Lancashire, that we get our fair share of rural funding for health services such as the Slaidburn health centre and that we get equal funding per pupil in our schools? Finally, for the 57% who voted Brexit and for the almost 100% who believe in democracy, will he ensure that after the general election, when he is Prime Minister, he will deliver the Brexit people voted for?

The Prime Minister: I can certainly give my hon. Friend an assurance on his second point. The only way to deliver a great Brexit is to vote for the Conservative party and this Government. I can make him happier still by pointing out that those 153 police are just the first wave for Ribble Valley, as part of the 20,000 more police who we will be putting on the streets of this country.

Q2. [900229] Jess Phillips (Birmingham, Yardley) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I have never known this place without you here, and it is going to be different. It is a delight to see your children here watching today, because I know that, while you have a responsibility to Parliament, you also take your responsibilities as a parent incredibly seriously. And now to the Prime Minister.

[Interruption.]

Today is my son Danny’s 11th birthday. Thanks to the years of cuts voted for by the Prime Minister, my son Danny and hundreds of children in Birmingham, Yardley are in super-sized classes and are only being educated four and a half days a week. I do not want to hear his fancy stock answers about Brexit or Russia that he has been giving from his little folder or about how he is going to give more—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. Both representatives at the Dispatch Box spoke with force and fully. The hon. Lady is not going to be cut off by people ranting at her. She will be heard. If there are people who do not want to hear it, they are welcome to leave; I do not think she will care, and neither will I. Her question will be heard, and that is the end of it.

Jess Phillips: I do not want to hear the Prime Minister’s campaign-ad answer, because my son will not be able to go to school on Friday, and his campaign-ad answer does nothing for me as a parent. [Interruption.] I am so glad that they think it is really funny that children cannot go to school five days a week. The Prime Minister is responsible for the children in this country, and while he might struggle with that personally, will he today give a commitment that there will be a maximum number of children in every class post the election and that every single child will be able to go to school for five days a week?

The Prime Minister: May I first of all wish a very happy birthday to Danny? I can reassure the hon. Lady that I believe that under this Government—under this Conservative Government—he will have the best possible chance not only of having the funding for his school that he needs, because we are investing in every primary and every secondary school in the country, but of having, as I say, the £14 billion to level up funding both in primary and in secondary schools. I believe that Danny will have a better chance of a great job under this Government—and look at what we have achieved already: record employment under this Government—and a better chance of being able to find, eventually, a home. So Danny has a great future under this Government, and I hope she will reassure him on that point.

Q9. [900236] John Lamont (Berwickshire, Roxburgh and Selkirk) (Con): In Scotland, Nicola Sturgeon and the SNP are letting down our wonderful NHS staff and the patients they look after. Waiting time targets have been missed, capital investment has been slashed and there is a £1 billion maintenance backlog. Does the Prime Minister agree with me that, rather than obsessing about independence referendums, Nicola Sturgeon should end her neglect of Scotland’s NHS?

The Prime Minister: I congratulate my hon. Friend on everything that he does for his constituency of Berwickshire, and he is absolutely right. As I said earlier, that is why SNP Members rant, to use their own word, so incessantly about independence—because they wish to distract or to dead-cat, as the saying goes, from the lamentable failures of the SNP Government. He is entirely right that, if this goes on, I think the SNP will forfeit all right to manage the NHS in Scotland.

Q4. [900231] Ronnie Cowan (Inverclyde) (SNP): Fireworks in politics can be entertaining. Unfortunately, fireworks of explosive types can cause great distress to sensitive people, pets and livestock. The SNP Scottish Government ran a 14-week consultation and received over 16,000 responses: 94% of respondents said that they would welcome increased controls on the sale of fireworks. The relevant legislation covers consumer protection on explosives, environmental law and animal welfare law. Has the Prime Minister ever considered banning the sale of fireworks to the general public, and in the short time left to him, will he?

The Prime Minister: It is important to strike a balance, and people should be allowed to celebrate Guy Fawkes night and other occasions with fireworks, but the hon. Gentleman is plainly right that they are very disturbing for animals. My right hon. Friend the Business Secretary is looking at this very matter. I would just point out that, on animal welfare, it may interest him to know that there are measures we will be able to implement as
a result of Brexit—such as banning sow farrowing crates, for instance, which I think is of great concern to our constituents, and banning the live export of animals—that we would not otherwise be able to do. That is one of the reasons why we need to get Brexit done and take this country forward.

Q10. [900237] Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Thousands of British people in Wycombe have family and friends on one or both sides of the line of control in Kashmir. With so many serious allegations of human rights abuses being made, do the Government accept that this is not merely some foreign policy issue to be dealt with by others, but that it is an issue of the most immediate and profound concern in Wycombe and in towns across the UK?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend, and he is absolutely right not just that this matters very much to him and to his constituents, but that the welfare of communities in Kashmir is of profound concern to the UK Government. He also knows, of course, that it is the long-standing position of the UK Government that the crisis in Kashmir is fundamentally a matter for India and Pakistan to resolve and, alas, since we were there at the very beginning of this crisis, he will understand that, for long-standing reasons, it is not for us as the UK to prescribe a solution in that dispute.

Q5. [900232] Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): In my constituency, the squeeze on Government spending has meant that we have a third fewer police than we had in 2010, we have lost half our children’s centres and the state of disrepair at St Mary’s Hospital, Paddington, is so acute that, last week, the out-patients department was closed because of leaking sewage. How, then, can the Prime Minister justify squandering £2 billion of public money on no-deal Brexit preparations following his feeble pledge to exit the EU tomorrow, do or die?

The Prime Minister: I might ask the hon. Lady how she can justify this country spending another £1 billion per month on delaying our exit from the European Union, which is what she voted for.

I remind the hon. Lady that, under this Government, we are spending £225 million more per year on policing in London than was the case when I was Mayor of London. She might ask her friend the Mayor of London what he is doing with that money and why he cannot do better. Frankly, his record on policing in London is utterly shameful. She should be holding him to account.

Q13. [900240] Mr William Wragg (Hazel Grove) (Con): I welcome the significant additional investment in Stockport schools, thanks to the Prime Minister’s work. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister congratulate the excellent schools in my constituency and pledge further resources so that they can continue to deliver an excellent education for our young people?

The Prime Minister: I am very happy to congratulate Warren Wood and Norbury Hall schools. I believe that Norbury Hall is my hon. Friend’s alma mater. I confirm what I think he and the whole House know: those schools and every other school in the country are getting £14 billion more to level up funding for every pupil. That is possible because of the policies pursued by our one nation Conservative Government. It would be ruined by the Labour Opposition.

Q8. [900235] Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Owing to health inequalities, men in my Stockton North constituency live on average 16 years less than those in the Prime Minister’s. Does he agree it is time that my area got the new hospital promised 10 years ago but axed by the Tory-Lib Dem coalition?

The Prime Minister: I will certainly look at what we can do to ensure that the hon. Gentleman does get a new hospital in his constituency, because we have a huge programme now under way, but the only way to deliver that £34 billion investment in the NHS—the biggest in modern history—is to ensure we have a dynamic, one nation market economy of the kind that we have. I am afraid all the Labour party would do is whack up taxes on business and companies in such a way as to destroy the viability of the UK economy. That is the programme he supports.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (Rushcliffe) (Ind): Mr Speaker, may I take the occasion of your last Prime Minister’s questions and mine to join in the tributes to your role in the Chair? During your decade, there have been unprecedented attempts at times to try to increase the power of the Executive at the expense of this Parliament. You have been very formidable in maintaining the duty of government to be accountable to this House. I trust that your successor will try to live up to your considerable achievement.

To show that a veteran MP, even one who is retiring from the House, can still look to the future, will my right hon. Friend give me some clarity on what he will seek to achieve—if, by chance, he wins this unpredictable general election—by way of the permanent relationship he will have to negotiate between the EU and the United Kingdom as an ex-member? In the years of negotiation that he will have to undertake, will he seek to ensure that we maintain trade and flows of investment between the whole United Kingdom and the European Union that are free of tariffs, free of custom controls and largely free of regulatory distinctions; indeed, as near as possible to the single market and customs union that we are in? Just talking about a free trade agreement is an extremely vague aspiration that covers a wide range of possibilities. Can he demonstrate that he really is a liberal free trader at heart?

The Prime Minister: Indeed. As my right hon. and learned Friend knows, the advantage of the partnership we will build is that not only—Interrupt. J I am sure the talks would go well. We will have a zero-tariff, zero-quota arrangement with our European friends and partners. Under the current deal, which is a fantastic deal, we will also be able to do free trade deals around the world. There will be many ways in which we will stay very close to our European friends partners, but there will also be important ways in which we may seek to do things differently and better.

I have already mentioned animal welfare; I might mention tax breaks for new technology, I might mention cutting VAT on sanitary products, I might mention free ports. There are all sorts of ways to do this. I might
Mr Speaker: As the Father of the House leaves this place after 49 years without interruption, I for one want to salute him. [Applause.] The right hon. and learned Gentleman is one of the most popular and respected politicians in our country. For his service to this place, for his service to his constituents and for his service to our country, he deserves the warmest appreciation. For my part, I thank him for his support and friendship over decades. The right hon. and learned Gentleman, as most sensible people know, whether they agree with him or not, is a great man.

The Prime Minister: I am afraid that shows a fundamental division between us, alas, because I think that what we need is a strong and dynamic economy, and the evidence is that reducing corporation tax delivers more in yields and more in growth. That is how we have been able to commit now to spend another £780 million on special educational needs schools, and to allow communities to set up new SEND schools where they desire them. We will back them with the funding made available by that strong economy. That is the fundamental difference between the hon. Gentleman and me.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): Is my right hon. Friend aware that during your time in office, Mr Speaker, and the 326 Prime Minister's questions over which you have presided, thanks to decisions made by the Government and this House the British taxpayer has paid for life-saving vaccinations for more than 140 million children living in the poorest countries of the world? At a time of considerable division in our country, is that not an achievement in which the whole of Britain can take real pride?

The Prime Minister: It certainly is an achievement of which the whole House should be proud. I know that my right hon. Friend has done a huge amount to champion the cause of overseas development, and he can be absolutely certain that this Government will continue not just to provide support for vaccination around the world but to ensure that we continue to lead the world in our overseas development budget. Our commitment is followed and respected by countries around the world.

Q12. [900259] Jo Stevens (Cardiff Central) (Lab): Yesterday, it was reported that Ross England, a former staff member of the Secretary of State for Wales, had, in the words of the trial judge, single-handedly and deliberately sabotaged a rape trial by referring to the victim's sexual history against the judge's instructions. The trial had to be stopped and started again from scratch, and the defendant was convicted. Unbelievably, the Conservative party then selected Mr England as a Welsh Assembly candidate with the Secretary of State's endorsement. Is the Prime Minister going to sack Mr England?

The Prime Minister: It would be inappropriate for me to comment on ongoing legal proceedings.

Claire Perry (Devizes) (Con): This is also my last Prime Minister's questions, and I want to follow the comments that have been made about your strong leadership from that Chair, Mr Speaker, and, indeed, your kind comments about my good friend my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke) and others. I would also like, if I may, to take this opportunity to thank the staff of this place, particularly those in the Library and the catering department, and the Doorkeepers, who do so much to keep us hale and hearty. I thank my numerous friends and colleagues across this place, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), who have been so personally kind to me over the past few months and so supportive of our policies, particularly the introduction of our net zero legislation. I want to thank the people of Devizes who have given me their trust for the past nine years; it has been the privilege of my life to serve you.

I would like to ask the Prime Minister a question. Does he believe, like me, that there is no planet B and that we should take the opportunity of this Brexit blockage breaking election to move the country on and focus on the incredible things we can do as the host next year of the UN's global climate change talks, which may be in Glasgow but are a four-nation COP, so that we can help the world to get on with dealing with the problem of the next 30 years and how we repair our climate?

The Prime Minister: May I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend for everything she has done in her parliamentary and ministerial career, and associate myself with your comments, Mr Speaker, about my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke)? I know that my right hon. Friend is leaving this place to do something perhaps even more important, which is to run our COP 26 summit next year in Glasgow, and I know that she will do an absolutely outstanding job. She is completely right that it would be far more wonderful for this country to focus on what we can do to lead the world in tackling the problems of the environment and climate change rather than fretting away yet more political time and capital on two more pointless referendums. I thoroughly agree with her proposal.

Q14. [900241] Drew Hendry (Inverness, Nairn, Badenoch and Strathspey) (SNP): May I say to you from the highlands, Mr Speaker, gura math a thèid leat?
My constituent Rachel has been separated from her two young children and her husband Mark and forced to return to Malaysia because her £2,000 spousal visa application was refused. It was refused because her husband Mark’s payslips were not included. The problem is that payslips are not a requirement on the UK Visas and Immigration checklist. She called and emailed UKVI and was told that no other information was required. Does the Prime Minister consider that to be fair, and will he personally look into her new £2,000 application to ensure that this highland family are reunited by Christmas?

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for raising his constituent’s problem with UKVI and I will make sure that my right hon. Friend the Home Secretary addresses it immediately.

Mr John Baron (Basildon and Billericay) (Con): We all remember that the Opposition parties never wanted to give the people an EU referendum, even opposing our amendment to the 2013 Queen’s Speech, selected by you, Mr Speaker, an early Brexiteer, regretting the absence of a referendum Bill. Given that they have done everything they can to delay our departure, as we head into Christmas may I urge the Prime Minister, whatever their antics, to lead a positive, decent one nation campaign for a stronger economy to help those less fortunate that addresses the divisions in our country? We wish him well.

The Prime Minister: I thank the hon. Gentleman for putting that so succinctly and well. That is exactly what we want. I think it is what the people of this country want; they want to get Brexit done and they want to move forward with a one nation agenda to unite this country, and to level up across the country with better education, better infrastructure and fantastic new technology. That is our agenda; the Opposition’s agenda is for years more of political dither, delay and division.

Q15. [900242] Angus Brendan MacNeil (Na h-Eileanan an Iar) (SNP): Tapadh leibh, Mr Speaker, agus gur math a thèid leibh as well na Nh-Eileanan an Iar.

With Scotland’s changing status in Europe since 2014, why will the Prime Minister not agree to a section 30?

The Prime Minister: I thank my hon. Friend for putting that so succinctly. It is that we need a team that is united and deliver a great future for this country. That is what we offer, and I am afraid it is in sharp contradistinction from the Labour party, because last night more than 100 of them could not even be bothered to vote for a general election, which they are shortly about to contest. What kind of confidence is that in their leader?

Liz Saville Roberts (Dwyfor Meirionnydd) (PC): Ni fyddwn yn gweld eich tebyg eto yn y Ty hwn a byddwn yn gweld eich eisiau, Mr Speaker: I do not think we will see your like again, and we will miss you in this House.

We are coming to the close of nine years of Tory misrule, misinformation and broken promises. Leading us in this merry dance is the Prime Minister, a lord of misrule at this shamrock Christmas election. But my party has long been prepared for this election. In Wales we have a simple choice: we can back our country by voting Plaid Cymru or be let down once again by one of these deeply divided Westminster parties that offer nothing but more Brexit chaos. Will the Prime Minister be honest for once with Wales: there is only one way out of the chaos, isn’t there, and that is to remain in the European Union?

The Prime Minister: I thank the right hon. Lady for her beautiful Welsh—although I could not get all of the Welsh—but I remind her that the most important point that she might bear in mind is that her constituents, the people of Wales, voted to leave the European Union. And that is what the people of this country voted for; that is what the majority of the constituents of those on the Benches opposite voted for, and it is high time that they honoured that promise.

Dr Caroline Johnson (Sleaford and North Hykeham) (Con): My constituents in North Hykeham deal with some of the worst traffic congestion in the country, and they tell me that completing Lincoln’s bypass would make a huge difference to their lives. Can my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister confirm that his Government will support the building of this bypass?

The Prime Minister: Not only can I confirm that, but I can thank both my hon. Friend and our candidate in Lincoln, Karl McCartney, on everything they have done to campaign for that bypass.

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): May I, Mr Speaker, on behalf of the Members of my party thank you for your service to this House? You came to office at a very, very turbulent and challenging time for this House, and you have always been assiduous in protecting the rights of Back Benchers and smaller parties, and we thank you for that and wish you well in your retirement.
In the dying days of this Parliament, will the Prime Minister please do something for the victims of historical institutional abuse in Northern Ireland? I raised this at Northern Ireland questions. There is still time in this Parliament to get this legislation through. The victims have been waiting for so long now. There is cross-party, cross-community support; will he please act on that?

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend; he has campaigned very much on that issue. The Government of course have fulfilled their promise to introduce legislation on the matter, and, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has had productive meetings with representatives from victim and survivor groups. But the most powerful way to address this issue, as the right hon. Gentleman knows, will be if we can all work together to get the Stornmont Executive buck up and running to deal with the matter themselves.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): There will never be, because there could never be, a more eloquent and articulate Speaker than you, Mr Speaker; we will miss your style and your remarkable, encyclopaedic grasp of detail—and I will miss the literary references by the way, Mr Speaker.

Marcel Proust said the only—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I want to hear about Proust.

Sir John Hayes: Marcel Proust said: “The real voyage of discovery consists not in seeking new landscapes, but in having new eyes”.

Hard-working British patriots who voted to leave the European Union with fresh eyes have in their sights the bourgeois liberal elite who are trying to steal Brexit from them. Will my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, as he is broadcast on the wireless and elsewhere and actually meets people in real life too in the coming days and weeks, simply evangelise this plain and straightforward message: back Brexit, back Britain, back Boris?

The Prime Minister: There is only one way to take this country forward, and that is to get Brexit done. My right hon. Friend is a doughty campaigner for people in his constituency and across the country, and if our Government are returned, as I hope we will be—and I will work very hard to ensure that we are—the people of this country will be seeing record investment in their NHS, they will be seeing improvements in their wages through the biggest expansion of the living wage in memory, and they will be seeing reductions in the cost of living, because it is one nation Conservative policies that can be relied on to take this country forward—and the Labour party would take us backwards.

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): Mr Speaker, from the Liberal Democrats Benches may we wish you well and congratulate you on a decade particularly as a modernising Speaker? From topicality of debates to promoting diversity within the staff of the House to reforms to support parents who are MPs, you have helped to drag this institution out of the past so it can face the future.

At this general election, voters deserve better than a choice between the two tired old parties, and in the TV debates people deserve to hear from a leader who wants to stop Brexit and build a better future, so will the Prime Minister commit today to take part in those three-way debates, or is he going to run scared of debating with “a girly swot”?

The Prime Minister: I think what the people of this country want is the promises made to them kept, and I am not disposed to believe in the promises of the Liberal Democrats when their leaflets in London say they want to revoke the result of the referendum and their leaflets in the south-west of the country do not mention Brexit at all. That is what they stand for—a bunch of hypocrites, the lot of them. They stand for nothing but a policy of dither and delay and indecision. To take this country forward with fantastic environmental policies and fantastic policies on education of a kind that I think will appeal to all the hon. Lady’s constituents, she should join this party, vote for this Government and support us at the general election.

Jack Lopresti (Filton and Bradley Stoke) (Con): Mr Speaker, may I join the tributes from across the House to your service and your speakership? Even though, our 30-year friendship notwithstanding, I have not agreed with everything you have done recently, I have been a big supporter of you in the Chair. You have been a champion of Back Benchers, and you have allowed the Chamber to hold the Executive to account, and you have enabled that in a very good way. The best of luck, and good wishes to you and your family.

When my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister was standing for the leadership of our great party, he spoke about ending the witch hunt of our Northern Ireland veterans. He said:

“We need to end unfair trials of people who served Queen and country.”

He also said that the persecution of veterans facing historical allegations over troubles in Northern Ireland has “got to stop”. Given that there was nothing on that in the Queen’s Speech, will he give a clear manifesto undertaking that if he is re-elected as Prime Minister of a Conservative Government, he will bring forward legislation as quickly as possible to end this awful injustice?

The Prime Minister: Yes. I thank my hon. Friend for everything he has done to campaign on this issue. As he knows, the consultation on the new legislation was concluded only a few days ago. I can certainly give him the reassurance that we will bring forward legislation to ensure that, when there is no new evidence being provided, there are no unfair prosecutions of people who served this country faithfully and well.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: The Prime Minister said at the start that I had demonstrated that I was stretching time and I would not want to disappoint him. Two final contributions from colleagues who I know are leaving the House.

Mr Ronnie Campbell (Blyth Valley) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I have been in Parliament for 32 years. I have seen many Speakers in the Chair and I must say you have been the best. As we say in the north-east—it’s not quite the language of the Welsh—you’re a canny laddie.

The WASPI women were given a bad deal on their pensions. Does the Prime Minister have any plans to put that wrong right?
The Prime Minister: First, I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman as he leaves this House. Indeed, I repeat my congratulations to all hon. Members who are standing down on the service they have given.

The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of the WASPI women. As he knows, it is a very difficult and very emotionally charged issue. We have done our best to try to satisfy that group. Another £1 billion has, I think, been allocated to the support of WASPI pensioners. I would just remind Opposition Members who are chuntering at me that under the Labour Government I seem to remember female pensions went up by 75p. That was their approach to pension rights for women. We are looking at what more we can do to satisfy that issue but, as he knows, it is very difficult.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): Mr Speaker, I wish you well and add to the plaudits by thanking you for the way you have represented my father's old constituents of Buckingham. I know you have been assiduous in that.

Many years ago, the Prime Minister was campaigning in Newbury to help me get elected when he was asked by the Newbury Weekly News whether there was any chance of him becoming Prime Minister. He said that he thought there was more chance of being decapitated by a frisbee. I will continue to take great delight in the fact that he has defied those odds if he can commit to me here today to continue this country's bold ambition on ocean conservation, in which we are a world leader.

The Prime Minister: I thank my right hon. Friend for all the service he has given to this Government and this country. I remember vividly campaigning with him on one occasion when we were interrupted by a dog show. He has done particularly important work on conserving oceans. He has helped to ensure that this country has global leadership in establishing marine conservation areas around the planet. As you know, Mr Speaker, this country protects a vast expanse of the oceans, more than any country on earth, and it is thanks to the work of my right hon. Friend that we have put that issue at the forefront of our politics, protecting marine life and protecting not just the fish but the penguins as well. As he will know, a third of the world's Emperor penguins are British. He has done a signal job of protecting those penguins and I thank him for it.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Just before we proceed with a number of statements that need to be made, I would like to thank the Prime Minister and colleagues for their kind and generous personal remarks, which are greatly appreciated. I want to thank staff of mine, past and present, who have given of their time to be here today for the last Prime Minister's questions that I will chair. All of them are people who have worked with me for a significant period of time. We have had fantastic relations and a terrific bond. I hugely appreciate the fact that they have bothered to turn up on this occasion. In particular, I want to thank my wife Sally and our three children Oliver, Freddie and Jemima for the support, stoicism and fortitude they have displayed through thick and thin over the past decade. I will never forget it and I will always be grateful for it. [Applause.]
Speaker’s Statement

1.16 pm

Mr Speaker: It may also be for the convenience of the House for me to make a short statement about Dissolution guidance. The draft guidance for Members standing, Members not standing and Members’ staff is available on the intranet. It will be finalised after Dissolution is confirmed. In the course of today, answers to frequently asked questions—FAQs—will also be published. These will include an answer to the point of order raised by the right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) on Monday concerning arrangements for Remembrance Sunday.

Colleagues, I am very pleased to announce the appointment of Patricia Hillas as the new Speaker’s Chaplain. She was selected following a fair, open and competitive recruitment process. Tricia, as she likes to be known, is currently Canon Pastor at St Paul’s cathedral, where she leads on diversity and inclusion, and—goodness knows, there is a piquancy about this today—on the Church’s response in times of disaster. In particular, she was part of the team at St Paul’s that brought together the national memorial service following the Grenfell Tower disaster, working alongside the bereaved families and survivors, and local faith and other groups. As we know, that avoidable disaster has caused intense grief, pain and anger among those affected in the community.

Born in Kuala Lumpur to an Indian mother and a British father, Tricia moved to the UK with her family in 1971. Formerly a social worker, Tricia specialised in supporting individuals and families diagnosed with HIV and AIDS, helping them deal with complex multiple challenges with dignity. Married to Andrew, who is head of the youth offending service for Southwark, Tricia will additionally be priest in charge of St Mary-at-Hill in the City of London. I am also proud to say that she will be the second female Speaker’s Chaplain from a BAME background. Tricia replaces our dear friend, the Rev. Prebendary Rose Hudson-Wilkin, who leaves on Thursday to become—I am so proud to say this—the first black Bishop of Dover. Tricia’s start date remains to be agreed, but I hope that when she does take up the post, probably early next year, the House will enjoy working with her.

It may also be helpful to inform the House now—these matters have been properly discussed with the usual channels—that at the start of the general debate on the report from the Grenfell Tower inquiry, I will ask the House to observe a minute’s silence to reflect on that tragic event and those whose lives were lost.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at this day’s sitting, proceedings on the motion in the name of the Prime Minister in relation to the Report from the Grenfell Tower Inquiry may continue for three hours, though opposed, and shall then lapse if not previously disposed of.—(Rebecca Harris.)

Grenfell Tower Inquiry

Mr Speaker: I now ask the House to rise to observe a minute’s silence to reflect on the Grenfell tragedy and those whose lives were lost.

1.20 pm

The House observed a minute’s silence.

1.21 pm

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the report from the Grenfell Tower Inquiry.

I will be making quite a lengthy speech this afternoon, reflecting the comprehensive nature of the report, so if hon. Members will bear with me, I am sure that I will address many of the issues on which they may be planning to intervene.

The bereaved, the survivors and the members of the north Kensington community joining us in the Galleries today each have their own story to tell, their own perspective on what happened at Grenfell, but over the past two and a half years, they have been united in their fight to uncover the truth. It is not a fight they would ever have chosen, but it is one they have taken up with determination, dedication and great dignity. Yet their exceptional tenacity in seeking justice has not always been matched by their faith in the system’s ability to deliver. This is no surprise. After all, they have been let down many times before, too often overlooked and ignored in the months and years before the tragedy and shamefully failed by the institutions that were supposed to serve them in the days and weeks after it.

Since then, the survivors, the bereaved and the local community have endured one unbearable milestone after another—the funerals, the anniversaries, giving and hearing evidence at the public inquiry, the painful process of building a new life in a new home without loved ones and without treasured possessions and then the publication of this report today—all the while carrying with them the unimaginable trauma suffered that night. I am very much aware that no report, no words, no apology will ever make good the loss suffered and the trauma experienced, but I hope that the findings being published today and the debate we are holding this afternoon will bring some measure of comfort to those who suffered so much. They asked for the truth. We promised them the truth. We owe them the truth. And today the whole country and the whole world is finally hearing the truth about what happened at Grenfell Tower on 14 June 2017.

When the sun rose over London that morning, it revealed an ugly scar of black smoke cutting across an otherwise clear blue summer sky, and on the streets of north Kensington a scene of horror and desperation. Shortly before 1 o’clock that morning, a faulty fridge freezer had started a small fire in the kitchen of a flat on the fourth floor of the 24-storey Grenfell Tower. The resident of the flat did everything right. He raised the alarm, called the fire brigade and alerted his neighbours. Within five minutes, firefighters arrived to deal with what appeared to be a routine incident, and in the normal course of events, the fire would have been contained and extinguished, and that would have been that, but what happened that night was anything but normal.
Grenfell Tower Inquiry 30 OCTOBER 2019

Even before firefighters began to tackle the blaze on the inside of the tower, unbeknown to them flames were already beginning to race up the outside. Just seven minutes after the first firefighters entered the kitchen on the fourth floor, a resident on 22nd floor dialled 999 to report the blaze at her level, almost 200 feet higher. By 1.27 am, a column of fire had reached the roof, one whole side of the building was ablaze and dense smoke and searing flames, visible across the capital, began wrapping around the tower, penetrating its heart. By 1.30 am, less than three quarters of an hour after it began, it was clear to those watching below that the inferno was completely out of control.

Grenfell Tower, filled that night with almost 300 souls in its 129 flats, was beyond saving. The fire that shocked the nation and the world that June morning took the lives of 72 men, women and children. The oldest, known simply as Sheila, was a poet, artist and great grandmother who had brought joy to many and seen and experienced much in her 84 years. The youngest, Logan Gomes, had never even seen his own parents. He was stillborn hours after his mother made a narrow escape from the choking, noxious smoke. Many who lived together died together: husbands and wives, parents and children were found in each other’s arms. Those who survived saw everything they owned reduced to dust and ash: wedding dresses, irreplaceable photographs, beloved children’s toys—all gone. The true scale of the trauma, the impact of the fire not only on those who survived but on those who lost loved ones or who witnessed its destruction, is unlikely ever to be known.

Grenfell represented the biggest loss of life in a single incident in the UK since the Hillsborough tragedy 28 years previously, but my predecessor as Prime Minister, my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), was determined that there would be no repeat of the travesty that followed that disaster, which saw the friends and families of those who died forced to fight the establishment tooth and nail, year after year, decade after decade, to secure justice for their loved ones. That is why just 15 days after the tragedy she appointed one of our most experienced and respected former judges, Sir Martin Moore-Bick, to lead a rigorous public and completely independent inquiry into what happened.

Sir Martin has today published his report on the first phase of that inquiry, covering the events of 14 June: the cause of the fire and its rapid spread, and the way in which emergency services and others handled the immediate response. As the sponsoring Minister under the terms of the Inquiries Act 2005, I laid copies of the report before Parliament this morning. I was in no doubt that the House should have the opportunity to debate it on the day of publication.

Grenfell was a national tragedy, and this is a report of great national importance. However, I recognise that Sir Martin has produced a very substantial piece of work—almost 1,000 pages across four volumes—and that therefore the vast majority of Members will have not yet have had an opportunity to digest and analyse it in any great detail. I believe that Members have an important role to play in scrutinising such reports and the Government’s response to them, so let me reassure the House that we will seek to schedule a further debate on Sir Martin’s findings at the earliest suitable opportunity so that Members can debate the report in detail. Obviously that may be after the election, but we will certainly ensure that it will happen.

Of course, what happened during the hours in which the fire raged is only half the story. Phase 2 of the inquiry, which will start taking oral evidence earlier in the new year, will look at the wider context, including the nature and application of building regulations, the way in which local and central Government responded to the fire, and the handling of concerns raised by tenants over many years. Phase 1 sets out what happened; phase 2 will explain why. Such a complex process will inevitably take time—longer than any of us would wish—but, as I have said, we owe it to the people of Grenfell Tower to explain, once and for all and beyond doubt, exactly why the tragedy unfolded as it did, and with the standard set by this first report, I am confident that that is exactly what will happen.

Sir Martin’s work is exhaustive in its detail. He provides an authoritative, and often harrowing, minute-by-minute account of the fire and its terrifying spread. Led always by the facts, his recommendations are clear and numerous, and where there are failings to be highlighted, he does so without fear or favour. Nowhere is that clearer than in his verdict on the single biggest cause of the tragedy. He leaves no doubt that the cladding on the exterior of Grenfell Tower was the defining factor in the rapid and all-consuming spread of the blaze.

It was the cladding—the aluminium composite material rainscreen—and the combustible insulation behind it that ignited because of the fire in flat 16. It was the cladding that allowed the flames to climb so rapidly up the outside of the tower, causing compartmentation to fail. It was the cladding that turned into molten plastic raining fire on the streets of north Kensington and causing the blaze to travel up and down the building. In short, it was the cladding that turned a routine and containable kitchen fire into a disaster of unprecedented proportions that cost 72 people their lives. Sir Martin is clear that the cladding on Grenfell Tower was fitted in breach of building regulations. Why that was allowed to happen, and who was responsible for it, will be covered in phase 2 of his inquiry.

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab) rose—

The Prime Minister: I give way to the right hon. Gentleman, who I know was bereaved, or suffered the loss of a friend, in the Grenfell fire.

Mr Lammy: I am grateful to the Prime Minister for giving way, and for the manner in which he is making his speech.

It is still the case that men, women and children up and down the country will be sleeping tonight in buildings with that cladding. So many years after the tragedy, does the Prime Minister not think that, in this sixth richest democracy in the world, we could have done more to prevent people from sleeping in infernos across our country?

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman for his point; indeed, I was coming to that very matter in my explanation of what happened. All I can say is that he is quite right. We cannot afford to wait for the full conclusions of the report. That is why, as my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for Housing,
Communities and Local Government has just pointed out to me, we have allocated a further £600 million to the removal of such cladding. It is essential that we remove similar cladding on all buildings as soon as possible, which is why we have established the fund to pay for the removal of such cladding systems from tall residential buildings.

I know that progress is not as fast I should like, but I am pleased to say that all such buildings owned by central and local government have now had their cladding removed, are undergoing work to remove it, or, at the very least, have such work scheduled. In the private sector, progress is slower, and too many building owners have not acted responsibly.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): What action will be taken against private building owners who fail to remove or replace the cladding by the June 2020 deadline?

The Prime Minister: My hon. Friend raises an important point. We propose to name the businesses and companies that own those buildings but are failing to comply, to encourage them to get on with this vital work. While the people living in those privately owned buildings are safe—and, as the House will know, round-the-clock fire patrols and other temporary measures ensure that that is the case—I am in no doubt that they need a long-term and lasting solution.

Several hon. Members rose—

The Prime Minister: May I just make some progress? Nearly all private high residential buildings where such cladding remains are now in line to have remedial work scheduled. Where that is not the case the Government will work with local authorities to take enforcement action if landlords refuse to deal with the problems themselves. I think the House will agree that they have had enough time. There are no more excuses; they must make those buildings safe, or face the consequences.

Mr Clive Betts (Sheffield South East) (Lab): The Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee has done a lot of work on this issue, and we have highlighted the need for speedy removal of the cladding. It is in the private sector that there are often disputes between the freeholder and the leaseholders, who may be legally responsible but simply do not have the wherewithal to do the work. I am pleased by what the Prime Minister has said, but will he confirm that he will work with local authorities and they will do the work in default, in order to ensure that people in these properties are safe?

The Prime Minister: We will indeed be working—in fact, we are already working—with local authorities to ensure the requirement that they remove the cladding in question. Although I—like, I think, many Members—feel that progress should be faster, I can assure the hon. Gentleman that we are hard at it to remove that cladding.

If I may, I shall turn now to the second and most important factor that Sir Martin identified. The cladding on Grenfell Tower caused the fire to spread out of control and to behave in ways that nobody had seen before. This unprecedented fire created an unprecedented challenge to the men and women sent to fight it. Since 2017, much has been written from many perspectives about the way in which the London Fire Brigade handled the unfolding disaster, so let me be very clear from the start.

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for the thoughtful delivery of his speech. I have seen the report this morning, and I have seen its recommendations. Will he give an undertaking today to enable adequate extra funding so that those recommendations can be taken forward as a matter of haste? It has been two and a half years, and that is too long. We need that money specifically so that they can be taken forward quickly.

The Prime Minister: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, and I can tell her that I will be coming to that matter—and, I think, probably all the matters that hon. Members wish to address—a bit later in my remarks.

I think that the House will want to hear now about Sir Martin’s opinions on the way in which the London Fire Brigade handled the disaster. After examining all the evidence and listening to hundreds of witnesses and experts, Sir Martin does not call into doubt the actions or the bravery of any of the rank-and-file firefighters dispatched to Grenfell Tower. No one in this House or the other place should be in any doubt about that. As Mayor of this great city of London, I saw for myself the courage and commitment demonstrated by the men and women of the London Fire Brigade, and Sir Martin’s report bears that out. It tells of firefighters exhibiting “extraordinary courage and selfless devotion to duty” as they pushed themselves “to and even beyond the limits of endurance”, facing choking smoke and temperatures as high as 1,000° C. Their work that night was nothing short of phenomenal.

However, Sir Martin concludes that the firefighters on duty that night were “faced with a situation for which they had not been properly prepared”. He finds the London Fire Brigade’s planning and training for such an incident were “gravely inadequate”, and that on the night of the fire there were “serious deficiencies” in command and control. The report highlights a lack of co-ordination between emergency services, which Sir Martin calls a “serious failure” of stated policies. He also finds—the point that will be of most concern to those who lost loved ones—that the failure to order an evacuation of the tower once the fire was clearly out of control most probably led to the deaths of individuals who could otherwise have been saved.

Grahame Morris (Easington) (Lab) rose—

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown (The Cotswolds) (Con) rose—

The Prime Minister: If I may, I will continue, as it will be important for the House to hear the whole context in which these criticisms and points are being made.

The so-called “stay put” policy is the bedrock on which all plans for fighting fires in tall residential buildings are based. Building regulations are supposed to mean that fires cannot spread beyond individual flats, because they are compartmented. When that is the case, it is indeed safest for most residents to stay in their homes.
until the fire is extinguished, but at Grenfell that was not the case. The fire spread widely and rapidly, up, down and across the tower.

Grahame Morris: Will the Prime Minister give way?

**The Prime Minister:** If I may, I will continue so that the House can get the whole picture that Sir Martin wants to convey.

By 1.30 am, it was clear that the compartmentation had failed. By 1.50 am, it was still not too late to order an evacuation, yet according to Sir Martin senior officers simply could not conceive of a situation in which compartmentation could fail so comprehensively. In the report, “stay put” is described as such an article of faith within the fire service that senior officers were reluctant to let the reality before them override their training. As a result, the decision to order an evacuation was not taken until 2.35 am, by which time the tower’s single staircase was already filling with impenetrable smoke.

Even after that time, poor and confused lines of communication meant that operators in the 999 control room were not aware that the advice had changed. Swamped by the sheer volume of calls, and dealing with a challenge well outside their experience and training, some continued to give conflicting advice to callers trapped inside the tower. Sir Martin notes that many operators did not realise how all-encompassing the fire had become until well after 5 am, when a lull in calls allowed them to check their phones and see images of the burning building for the first time. Information gleaned from callers inside the tower was faithfully recorded, but only rarely made its way to firefighters who could act on it.

Grahame Morris: I thank the Prime Minister for the tone and the reflective manner in which he is delivering his speech, but may I point out that this was not the first time that compartmentalisation had failed? In July 2009, Lakanal House, a multi-storey building, suffered a similar tragedy in which six people lost their lives and more than 20 were seriously injured. Subsequently, the coroner wrote to the then Minister, Eric Pickles, with a recommendation that the “stay put” policy be reviewed, but no action was taken.

**The Prime Minister:** The hon. Gentleman is making an important point, as the whole House knows. As I said at the outset, that is among the issues that will be addressed in the second part of Sir Martin’s report, but I will say a little bit about it later on. The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to raise that issue.

While brave firefighters led many people to safety from inside the tower, Sir Martin concludes that the chaos and confusion meant that some calls for help were not responded to until it was too late.

Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown: I have visited Grenfell Tower twice to sympathise with the relatives, but I have also been able to see at first hand how firefighters in these complex situations risk their lives. I had a meeting only yesterday at the Fire Service College in my constituency, which provides worldwide training for every type of fire officer. Does my right hon. Friend agree that we owe it to our firefighters up and down this country to enable them to have the very best training?

**The Prime Minister:** I thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. I am well aware that he has a centre for the training of firefighters at Moreton-in-Marsh in his constituency. Directly on his point, Sir Martin cautions all of us against making judgments at a distance, and I agree with him wholeheartedly on that.

It is very easy for us on these green Benches to have 20:20 hindsight. We are not about to run into the heart of a fire that is blazing more than 200 feet into the night sky.

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for giving way. First, when he was Mayor of London he presided over fire service cuts despite warnings from London MPs from across parties, which he did not heed. Does he regret that? Secondly, on his Government’s watch, the regulators were stripped of powers, including the ombudsman’s power to investigate complaints without complainants having to go to their MP first. Will he now take action? He does not have to wait for the reports to come out to take action to strengthen the regulations. Will he provide the much-needed resources? We had to fight tooth and nail for two years with Grenfell United and the survivors to secure the £600 million. It is time that he acted and provided the necessary additional funding so that our constituents can sleep at night without having to worry about whether their homes may be set alight.

**The Prime Minister:** Sir Martin notes that appliances were at the site within five minutes, and he makes no findings that I am aware of about a lack of resources, nor about the other issues that the hon. Lady raises.

It is vital that individuals are held accountable for their errors, and when we do so we must do so very carefully. It is clear from this report that the firefighters on the ground were in a position that they should never have been in. They were doing their damnedest to tackle a fire that should never have been allowed to happen. But that does not absolve us of responsibility.

We must ensure that the failures identified by the inquiry are corrected, because not only does Sir Martin highlight that mistakes made by the London Fire Brigade in responding to Lakanal House, which the hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) mentioned earlier, were repeated, he also raises concerns that the London Fire Brigade is, I am afraid, “at risk of not learning the lessons of the Grenfell Tower fire.”

Several hon. Members rose——

**The Prime Minister:** I must make some progress.

It is vital that the London Fire Brigade learns those lessons, and I am sure that everyone there will want them to do so. As a constituency MP, Mayor, or journalist, I never met any firefighter who was anything less than totally committed to public safety. I will be working with the London Fire Brigade, the Mayor’s office and local authorities across London to ensure that the lessons of Grenfell are learned and that Londoners are made safer for it. Where Sir Martin recommends that responsibility for fire safety should be taken on by central Government, I can confirm that we will legislate accordingly.

Several hon. Members rose——
The Prime Minister: If hon. Members will allow me to complete my points, I think they will hear the answers to their questions.

More widely, we plan to accept in principle all the recommendations that Sir Martin makes for central Government. We will set out how we plan to do so as quickly as possible, but I can assure the House and all those affected by the Grenfell tragedy that where action is called for action will follow.

Janet Daby (Lewisham East) (Lab): I thank the Prime Minister for giving way and for his tone in delivering his response to the report. On the night of Grenfell, it took 38 minutes for a high-reaching aerial appliance to arrive. By that time, the building’s cladding had already caught fire. Will the Prime Minister consider his own actions in removing aerial appliances from London Fire Brigade’s engines and in the cuts made to the fire service when he was Mayor of London?

The Prime Minister: Sir Martin makes no recommendation on that point to the best of my knowledge.

For the survivors, the bereaved and the local community, the report will prove particularly harrowing, yet I hope it will strengthen their faith in Sir Martin’s desire to determine the facts of the fire and this Government’s commitment to airing those facts in public, no matter how difficult they may be, and to acting on them. That commitment is absolute—

Several hon. Members rose—

The Prime Minister: Mr Speaker, I have given way enough.

That commitment is absolute, because if any good is to come of this senseless tragedy—a tragedy that should never have happened—and if it is to become a catalyst for change in our approach to fire safety and, indeed, to social housing more widely, we must get to the truth about what happened and why. We must expose and fix the failings that allowed an otherwise safe building to become so dangerous, that allowed a small kitchen fire to become a devastating inferno, and that led to so many people being told to stay in their homes when they could and should have been fleeing to safety. The inquiry is a vital part of that.

I thank Sir Martin and his team for all their work so far, and I know that all current and former Ministers, civil servants and all public sector workers will fully co-operate with phase 2. While uncovering the truth is very important to the survivors and the bereaved, it is not the only aspect of the post-Grenfell story that requires our attention. We will continue, as the previous Prime Minister promised, to support the affected families long after the television cameras are gone. We will continue the work of the Grenfell ministerial recovery group, which brings together the efforts of all parts of central and local government in meeting the needs of the community. We will continue to ensure that a beautiful and appropriate memorial is created on the site of the tower—a process that is being led by the bereaved and the local community.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Will the Prime Minister give way?

The Prime Minister: No, I am winding up.

We will continue to make sure that those affected by the fire have an active and engaging role to play in implementing the lessons of Grenfell, including working closely with the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government to develop the policies in our social housing White Paper. We will continue to implement the findings of the Hackitt review of building regulations, and I have asked the civil servants responsible for implementing Sir Martin’s recommendations to provide me with regular and frequent updates on their progress. I will not allow the lessons of this tragedy to fall through the cracks.

The night of 14 June was horrendous, but in the darkness we have also seen the best of humanity: the residents who sacrificed their lives to save their children or neighbours, the local community that rallied round in such an incredible fashion, holding the survivors in a tight embrace as the authorities failed to step up, and the bereaved and survivors here with us today. Those who would have every reason to hide away have instead fought to uncover the truth about what happened that terrible night. They have forced themselves to relive time and again the kind of trauma that most of us, mercifully, cannot begin to imagine. They have dedicated so much of their lives in so many ways to ensure that those who died on the night of 14 June 2017 will always be remembered. To them, I say once again that the truth will out, that justice will be done, and that Grenfell Tower and the people who called it home will never be forgotten.

1.59 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): May I start by thanking the Prime Minister for the serious way in which he has approached this matter and for his speech today on the findings of Sir Martin Moore-Bick’s first report? I also thank you, Mr Speaker, for ensuring that we had a minute’s silence at the start of the debate for those who lost their lives on that terrible, terrible night.

I start by paying tribute to the survivors of the fire and their family members, who have campaigned with such dignity and determination for the past two years—two long years. Many of them are here today in the Gallery or watching the debate on television. For them, it is yet another horrible day of remembering a father, a mother, a brother, a sister, a cousin, a nephew, a niece who they will never see again and who will never come back. Those memories will never go away. With sympathy we should have an understanding of our responsibility to ensure that everyone is able to live in safety, wherever they are in this country.

Seventy-two people lost their lives on that night in June 2017. That situation rocked the community and shocked the whole country. It brought together help from lots of people—people from local churches, mosques and synagogues, and from different community organisations. People rushed to Grenfell as the fire was still blazing with gifts of food and toys, and with support. That simple human understanding from so many people is something we have to cherish and begin to understand, because it demonstrates that there is a natural human instinct to help people.

I cannot forget going there straight after the fire and talking to dazed people who did not really understand what had happened and to exhausted firefighters, police officers and many others who were trying to comprehend
the enormity of the situation. It was truly horrific. I pay absolute tribute to all those volunteers and others who turned out that day to help. Local government officers from all across London immediately volunteered to try to help, because the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea seemed to have difficulty in responding to the enormity of the situation—I say no more than that at the moment.

It was a tragedy, Mr Speaker, but it was an avoidable tragedy. A tragedy is when there is an earthquake, a tidal wave or a volcano that we cannot understand or predict. This was an avoidable tragedy. All the survivors—all of them—deserve a new home and safety and security in this country, as my right hon. Friend the shadow Home Secretary demanded at the time. All those responsible for this avoidable tragedy must understand that justice must prevail. Every necessary measure must be put in place to prevent a fire such as Grenfell from ever happening again.

Karen Lee: Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is a national fire response issue and that it is not just about London? Will he comment on my request to the Prime Minister that extra funding be made available so that the recommendations can be put in place, because I have not heard a positive response that says, “Yes, we will pay for that”?

Jeremy Corbyn: Yes, it is a tragedy at Grenfell and a tragedy in that part of London, but obviously it is a potential tragedy anywhere where there is dangerous cladding on blocks of flats. My hon. Friend, who is our shadow Fire Minister, specifically asked that question about funding. Perhaps the Prime Minister or whoever responds for the Government would care to answer that point.

I have been on a number of the walks for Grenfell. Over my life, I have been on many marches and demonstrations, but I have never been on anything so poignant and powerful as thousands and thousands and thousands of people silently walking through north Kensington and then walking past the carcase that is Grenfell Tower. The power of that—the power of silence—is palpable. What is also palpable is the way in which the community as a whole supports those people.

When the silent march passes the fire station, there is genuine love and affection for all the firefighters who risked their lives that night. I know that nobody is trying to do this today, but let us not blame firefighters for their work. They did everything they could, and well beyond that.

I thought that it was absolutely right to hold the service in St Paul’s, because it was a way of bringing people together to try to come to terms with the horror of their loss. The events that I have been to in the mosque have also brought people together to try to comprehend the horror of their loss.

Tracey Crouch: I was privileged to be the Minister for Civil Society at the time and, along with the hon. Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed), I met many of the charities and support organisations. Will the right hon. Gentleman join me in thanking them for all the work they have done, both in the immediate aftermath of the tragedy and since then, to support the victims, their families and the wider community?

Jeremy Corbyn: I absolutely do, and I thank the hon. Lady for that intervention. I have never forgotten meeting so many different groups and charities that day, who were already doing their best to meet in the church. Community organisations, the citizens advice bureau, North Kensington Law Centre and so many more were all doing their very best. There were also collections in the local community to try to ensure that people had what they needed.

We welcome the report on the first phase of Sir Martin Moore-Bick’s inquiry, which, as the Prime Minister pointed out, not everybody has yet had a chance to study in detail. It has, after all, only just come out. We expect the Government and the other agencies cited to respond in full. It is very unlikely that a further debate will be held in this Parliament, so it will be for the next Parliament, I hope, to start with an urgent debate on this matter.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I wonder whether the right hon. Gentleman would like to reflect on the two events that Mr Speaker organised in Speaker’s House to which survivors came. I thought they were very useful occasions for Members to speak informally to people who had had this dreadful experience. It was remarkable how stoical they were and how grateful they were to the fire service and all those who had helped them.

Jeremy Corbyn: Those were memorable occasions. There was courage and determination in support of the families and those who were bereaved, but there was also a strong determination to make sure that Grenfell never happens again anywhere else.

I think that the Grenfell survivors are the heroes of all this. When people go through a tragedy, the natural human instinct is to put it behind them, move away and do something else if they have that choice or opportunity. The survivors have not done that; they have stayed in the community and kept that community together, in order that the rest of us might learn the lesson of the pain they went through.

The limited scope of the inquiry was agreed by the Government. The fact that phase 1 looked only at what happened on the night of 14 June is important, because many questions inevitably remain unanswered and the recommendations do not cover the range of issues that need urgent action from Ministers. The Prime Minister talked about the whole truth, but sadly the whole truth is not yet with us.

Helen Hayes (Dulwich and West Norwood) (Lab): One of the unanswered questions for phase 2 of the inquiry relates to the types of flammable cladding that are out there on buildings right now. The Government’s response to date has focused solely on ACM-type cladding. There has been a failure both to acknowledge fully that there are other types of cladding that might be just as flammable and just as much of a risk, and to commission an adequate range of tests so that building owners and residents can know what is on their buildings and what response is required. Will my right hon. Friend join me in calling on the Government urgently and ahead of the second phase of Sir Martin Moore-Bick’s report to address comprehensively the range of flammable cladding that is still putting residents at risk?
Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I am going to come on to more details about that a bit later in my speech, but she is right about it. She and I represent constituencies that include people living in high-rise blocks, and we know the stress and pain they go through. She is absolutely right on everything she said in that intervention.

Jim Fitzpatrick (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I, too, welcome the tone of the Prime Minister’s presentation and the Government’s position. My hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) has just alluded to this, but does my right hon. Friend agree that there is a much bigger picture than phase 1? Phase 1 focuses on the fire brigade response mostly, and many in the media have targeted the fire brigade for criticism, some of which is not unfair, but they are targeting only the fire brigade, as opposed to waiting for the big picture. The inquiry was always going to take a long time, it is incomplete and there are others, including ourselves here in this Parliament, who have some responsibility for the conditions that led to the Grenfell tragedy taking place.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. He knows, as a former firefighter, not only the stress and strain firefighters go through, but the way in which, because we now live in an age of such instant media, people half-read half a bit of a report of a bit of the report and decide that that is the conclusion of all things. This is the first of two major reports and we should be cautious in throwing blame around too quickly and too soon, because these are serious and tragic matters.

Mr Lammy: Does my right hon. Friend also agree that many of the families are waiting for the criminal prosecutions and inquiries being made by the Met police? A number of people have been interviewed under caution. There are many who believe that what happened at Grenfell amounts to corporate manslaughter and that we should also wait to find out who is going to be prosecuted for what happened.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention. He lost a dearly loved friend in that fire and he has done great work in supporting the Grenfell community, and I thank him for that. I ask the Government also to listen carefully to the remarks he has just made. Remembering people who lost their lives in a wholly preventable fire has to be met with a political response, which is what we are trying to do; with a procedural response, which is about the fire service and fire training and which I will come to in a moment; and of course with building regulations. But this also has to be about justice, because of those people who have knowingly—perhaps or perhaps not; that is what a court must find out—clad buildings with materials that they knew to be dangerous. That is where the corporate manslaughter issues arise. I hope that neither the Government nor anybody else will put any obstruction in the way of that process. The Prime Minister talks about the whole truth and that clearly is not with us yet.

In the light of the particular focus on actions of the London Fire Brigade in phase 1 of the inquiry report, we urge that the recommendations made of the London Fire Brigade are given the full response they require. At the same time, I want to pay tribute to the heroic actions of firefighters in our country every day, including on the night of the Grenfell fire. A lot of the time they stand in fire stations waiting for something to happen, but then they have to go and deal with it. They do not know what they are going to deal with before they get there. Our natural instinct whenever we see a thing of danger is to put ourselves in a place of safety—to run away, to avoid, to do whatever—but firefighters do not do that. They cannot do that. They have to run into a burning building while the residents are trying to escape from it. Firefighters know that is in their job and they know it is their responsibility, and they do it day after day. We should understand the bravery of those who sacrificed so much that night. Despite being told, when they came out of the fire, exhausted and dehydrated, that they must not go back in, as it was against fire service regulations, they said, “No, we might manage to save a life” and so they went back into that fire. That is what they do.

Matt Wrack is the general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union and a man who has been a firefighter. His union is composed of firefighters and he is a strong man who fights for his members. He spoke that summer at the Durham miners’ gala. I had never before known 200,000 people in absolute silence, as there were while he described what his members—his firefighters—had done at Grenfell. We should pay tribute to all firefighters and of course to the work done by the FBU, which helps to make us all safe.

Janet Daby: I thank my right hon. Friend for the great tribute he is paying to our fire brigade service. Does he agree that between 2010 and 2016, the Government cut central funding by 28% in real terms, leading to 11,000 fewer firefighters? The then Mayor of London, now our Prime Minister, was at the forefront of cuts to the fire service, cutting 27 fire appliances, 55 firefighters and 324 support workers, and closing 10 fire stations. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Prime Minister should apologise for removing aerial appliances from the London Fire Brigade fire engines when he was Mayor of London?

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend. Friend for that intervention. Like other colleagues who have intervened, she represents a constituency in which many residents live in tower blocks. I do not suppose too many Members of Parliament live in high-rise, council-owned tower blocks, but we should all understand the stress and strain that people go through with worry about what would happen in a fire.

The Government’s response to Grenfell has been too slow and not strong enough, on every front, from rehousing survivors to dealing with Grenfell-style ACM cladding on hundreds of other blocks across this country.

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): On the Government response, one in 10 of the council blocks in England is in Birmingham; we are talking about 213 and 10,000 households. In the aftermath of the fire, the west midlands fire service recommended the retrofitting of sprinklers in all those blocks, costing £31 million. At the dreadful time we lived through at Grenfell, pledges were made that local authorities would be helped and supported in making tenants safe. Birmingham has not received one single penny, and that cannot be right.
Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and he is absolutely right; this is a huge gap in the Government’s response. The retrofitting of sprinklers will help to control and possibly stop the spread of a fire. It will not stop every fire, but it will save lives, which is why it is so important that that issue be addressed properly.

The Prime Minister must now act urgently on the Government’s failures following Grenfell: the failure to learn the lessons from previous high-rise fires, with no proper response having been made to the coroners’ recommendations made in 2013 following the Lakanal House fire and the Shirley Towers fires in Southampton. Those were terrible tragedies, where lives were lost—those of firefighters in the case of Shirley Towers and those of residents in the case of Lakanal House. We have to learn those lessons. We cannot be here, going on towards 2020, still talking about the coroner’s response from 2013 to the Lakanal House fire. Another failure was the failure to rehouse survivors, with some families still living in hotels and temporary accommodation more than two years on—that is shocking.

The Government have also failed to re-clad blocks identified with dangerous, Grenfell-style cladding. Disgracefully, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dulwich and West Norwood (Helen Hayes) pointed out, eight in 10 residential blocks have still yet to have that ACM cladding replaced. Almost 60,000 people are still living in blocks that have this cladding: 18,000 in the residential social sector and 41,000 in the private sector. Thousands of blocks of flats all over the country need to be dealt with urgently now. I say that in respect of those with ACM cladding, but, as my hon. Friend pointed out, that is not the only dangerous cladding that must be dealt with. Local authorities must act quickly to ensure that every block in their community, whether public or private, is inspected and that the dangerous cladding is removed.

My constituency has some tower blocks. I went to a meeting after there had been a small fire in one flat, when fear ran all through the estate because people could see what had happened at Grenfell. Dangerous cladding was found in another block, and I commend my local authority, Islington, for immediately responding when it was discovered by putting fire watchers in within two hours and starting removing the cladding a week later. That is a local authority that is totally on it. The local authority got on to it straight away, and it is with pleasure that I have seen that the scaffolding is about to come down because the replacement has already happened. That shows what happens when local authorities work efficiently and quickly because they are totally on it.

Rushanara Ali: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it is an outrage that the Government have allowed so much time to be wasted before supporting local authorities to deal with ACM cladding? Only three buildings in my constituency have had the work done. There are 39 private blocks in which people cannot sleep at night. Does he think that the Government should learn some empathy? Perhaps the Prime Minister should visit some of the residents who have to live like this; he might then learn the importance of urgent action. We do not see urgent action on this Government’s watch.

Jeremy Corbyn: My hon. Friend is so right: it is a question of urgent action. That means recognising that local authorities are underfunded and very stressed and strained by the situation. Local authorities know full well that unless they get the money refunded from the Government—that has not always happened—other services are affected because of their trying to bring about safety for their community.

Grenfell Tower would not have happened to wealthy Londoners. It happened to poor and mainly migrant Londoners. I have met Grenfell survivors on many occasions since that dreadful night, and they have all told me about the wonderful community that existed in and around Grenfell Tower. Those in the multi-ethnic, multi-racial community around Grenfell Tower are supporting each other now and were supporting each other that night. People tried to wake others who were frightened of the fire and those who were asleep and did not realise that the building was on fire. People did all that.

Although the report does criticise London Fire Brigade, we should remember that it was not firefighters who deregulated building safety standards; it was not firefighters who ignored the concerns of tenants; it was not firefighters who ignored the coroner’s report and failed to put sprinklers in high-rise blocks; and it was not firefighters who put flammable cladding on Grenfell Tower.

It is disgraceful that, two years on, there has still not been a major review or assessment of the “stay put” policy. I echo the Prime Minister’s words when he said that it is an article of faith in dealing with high-rise block fires, but although it may be an article of faith, there clearly has to be a serious review and examination of that policy. The Fire Brigades Union has raised the issue with Ministers on numerous occasions. Concerns about the “stay put” policy were raised with the Government years before Grenfell, by the FBU and others. Will the Government today stop dragging their feet and act?

Karen Lee: I raised the “stay put” policy at Home Office questions on Monday, so I am pleased that my right hon. Friend has raised it today.

Jeremy Corbyn: I thank my hon. Friend for her intervention.

The past nine years of austerity have seen cuts degrade our fire and rescue services. The reality and the truth is that we have fewer firefighters, fewer fire appliances and, as a result, slower response times. I am not being critical of individual firefighters or their collective response to try to deal with Grenfell. The reality is that if we cut fire services, we live in a more dangerous place. While firefighters selflessly risk their lives to protect others, the Government have not provided them with the resources that they need. Between 2010 and 2016, the Government cut central funding by 28% in real terms, followed by a further cut of 15% by 2020. These cuts have led to the loss of 11,000 firefighter positions—that is 20% of firefighters.

The Prime Minister will know that, as Mayor of London, he was at the forefront of the cuts to the fire service. In the eight years for which he was Mayor of London, the London Fire Brigade was required to make gross savings of £100 million. That led to the cutting of 27 fire appliances, 552 firefighters, 324 support staff, two fire rescue units and three training appliances, and it closed 10 London fire stations.

We all agree that Grenfell must never happen again. It happened because of the way in which building regulations either have not been adhered to or are
inadequate, because of an inspection regime that was either non-existent or inadequate and because of a response that was insufficient.

Mr Betts rose—

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab) rose—

Jeremy Corbyn: I give way first to my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts).

Mr Betts: My right hon. Friend is right that one of the real problems with the inspection regime is the way that responsibility was taken away from local authority building control officers, who acted independently. Very often developers can now appoint their own friends to sign off the buildings. Is that not something that Dame Judith Hackitt identified as a real problem that needs addressing? We need urgent action now, rather than to wait for legislation in two years’ time.

Jeremy Corbyn: As Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, my hon. Friend has done excellent work in highlighting all these issues, for which I thank him. That is Parliament at its best, examining what has happened.

I give way now to my hon. Friend the Member for Ipswich (Sandy Martin).

Sandy Martin: I was going to make exactly the same point as my hon. Friend. Friend; he represents a community with mixed housing so also has to deal with these issues.

There are serious questions to be asked about what the Government have done, about what has been happening with the funding of the London fire service and, of course, about the performance of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea. The night of 14 June will never, ever be forgotten. I have never forgotten talking in my office that evening to my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad)—who has been and is a wonderful representative for the people there—about what it was like being an MP. She had been an MP for only for a few days. I said, “It’s great, but it’s hard work and you need to get into it slowly.” She went home and had probably the greatest test of her life two hours later. The way she has spoken up for her community and what she has done is something we should all be very proud of.

The shameful fact is that feet have been dragged. The exact same cladding is on similar high-rise blocks; sprinklers have not been fitted; and thousands of people in this country will go to bed tonight, and tomorrow night, not feeling safe. I pay tribute to the firefighters and, most of all, I pay tribute to the dignity and solemnity of the survivors and the bereaved, who continue to campaign for justice so that no one else has to suffer like them.

I welcome Sir Martin Moore-Bick’s report and look forward to the second part of the inquiry. I want us to have a properly funded fire service in all parts of the country. I thank Grenfell United and all the survivors for everything they have done to try to bring people together and keep communities together. I welcome the fact that the Prime Minister has said that an appropriate memorial will be constructed near or on the Grenfell site, but the real memorial will be a properly funded fire service. The real memorial will be safety for people in every tower block throughout the country. Currently, 60,000 people are unsure of their own safety, and there are many more tower blocks with other kinds of composite materials that are just as dangerous. We need very tough regulation to ensure that all our people can sleep safely and soundly in their beds at night, rather than having in their minds the image of that burning monstrosity of a fire, which took the lives of so many wonderful, wholly innocent people.

Mrs Theresa May (Maidenhead) (Con): I thank the Government for scheduling this debate, which gives the House the very earliest opportunity to debate the recommendations from Sir Martin Moore-Bick’s report on part 1 of the public inquiry into what happened at Grenfell Tower. I thank the Prime Minister for his commitment to make time for further debate on this issue when Members from all parties will have had an opportunity to look more fully at the report and its recommendations.

Today’s debate gives us an opportunity to recognise, as my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition did, the appalling nature of the tragedy that took place at Grenfell Tower in June 2017. I thank my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister for the tone that he took in his speech and the understanding that he showed. This was a horrific loss of life and, of course, it was a tragedy that should never have happened. I pay tribute to the survivors and to the families and friends of those who died for the dignity and fortitude that they have shown in circumstances that none of us would ever want to face. They have shown not just dignity and fortitude, but commitment and dedication in their struggle for the justice they want for all those who lost their lives and also for those who lost everything they possessed and the home that they had built up.

I also thank and pay tribute to the survivors who gave evidence to the public inquiry. Reliving those horrific times cannot have been easy, but without their evidence it would not have been possible for Sir Martin Moore-Bick to produce his report. I also thank him for his thoroughness and for the considerate and thoughtful way in which he has produced this report. It is detailed, and aspects of it are shocking.

The public inquiry was set up not only to get to the truth of what happened on that night, but, crucially, to understand why it happened. As has already been mentioned by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition and by others in interventions, there are many questions as yet unanswered because they lie in phase 2 of the inquiry. Crucially, they are issues around building regulations, the cladding, the enforcement of regulations, and why cladding that was non-compliant with the regulations was put up—and it was agreed it be put up—on this building. It is significant that Sir Martin Moore-Bick found himself able to say clearly that the cladding was non-compliant. That was an important aspect and finding of phase 1 of the inquiry, although greater detail in relation to those matters will be gone into in phase 2 of the inquiry.
Sandy Martin: I thank the right hon. Lady for giving way. Does she not accept that, while phase 2 will need to deal with these more difficult issues, there are hundreds and hundreds of families still living in conditions that are completely unacceptable because actions have not been taken? These actions could be taken prior to phase 2 coming forward. For instance, in St Francis Tower in my own constituency, people are living in a building, which is, quite frankly, no longer fit for habitation because the cladding has been removed and there are now gaps around all the windows.

Mrs May: I say to the hon. Gentleman that, of course, the Government have put in place support both for local authorities and for the private sector to take action in relation to cladding. Following a question that was asked earlier not just about ACM cladding but about other cladding, I can say that the Department has also been ensuring that tests are undertaken on other cladding on these buildings. We also initiated Dame Judith Hackitt’s report and are clear that the recommendations of that report have been accepted by the Government.

I said that the issues around cladding, building regulations and so forth will need to be addressed in phase 2, but so, too, will the question of the role of Government and the role of the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea.

Karen Lee: Does the right hon. Lady agree that it just cannot be right that the survivors and bereaved of Grenfell are not properly permanently rehoused?

Mrs May: I recognise that since this terrible tragedy took place, significant efforts have been made to ensure that the survivors—those who have lost so much—have been provided with accommodation that is suitable for their needs. I know that in the early stages many people felt that that work did not go as quickly as it should have done. I recognise, too, that in the struggle that the survivors have been facing to ensure that justice can be done, that the truth can be uncovered, and, crucially, that responsibility for what happened is identified, they have felt that the response of Government at national and local level has not always been as swift or as full as they wished it to be. Every effort will be made, as my right hon. Friend said, to continue the work to support the families of those who suffered this terrible experience in this appalling tragedy. There are other aspects of support that need to be provided in the longer term as well, not least the question of providing mental health support for people who have been affected by this tragedy.

Of course, today we can only look at phase 1 of the inquiry, because that is the report that is before us. One thing that comes through from phase 1 and will be clear to anybody who has met or has had any discussions with members of the Grenfell community is the care that they feel for each other—not just care within families, but care for friends and neighbours, too, and, indeed, for their whole community. The Grenfell community has a lot to teach all of us about the true meaning of community.

It was that care for each other that led to their raising their concerns and fears, over a period of time, about the safety of the building in which they lived. Concerns were brought home to me at a very early stage—when I first met survivors from Grenfell Tower—that they had been raising these issues about the safety of their building over a period of time, and yet those issues, their voices and those concerns had gone unheeded and had been ignored. I want to go on to reference some of the shocking aspects of this report, but I think that one of the most shocking features that has come out of consideration of what happened at Grenfell Tower is that those people had been genuinely raising matters about safety and yet felt that those matters were just completely ignored—and in some cases they were indeed just completely ignored. That was what led to the work to look at social housing across the country. I am grateful that a number of Housing Ministers undertook that work.

I see my right hon. Friend the Member for Reading West (Alok Sharma), the first Housing Minister who started that work, in his place on the Treasury Bench. That work was due to lead to a social housing Green Paper. I was pleased to hear my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister reference a social housing White Paper. We are now about to go into an election. There is a purdah, but I urge the Government, as soon as possible and after Parliament is reconvened, to publish that White Paper, because change is needed to ensure that those who are living in social housing are able to have their voices heard so they can have the confidence that, when they raise issues, those issues will be acted on, and if they are not, they can seek redress in order to ensure that their concerns are being heard.

There are other shocking aspects of this report on which I wish to touch briefly. Some of them relate to the conclusions on the London Fire Brigade. Our emergency services do an amazing job, day in and day out, and there is absolutely no doubt that, on that fateful night, individual firefighters gave totally of themselves. They bravely went into a building with a fire whose like, as they said to me afterwards, they had never seen before, yet they bravely put themselves in danger to try to rescue others. None the less, it is also clear from Sir Martin Moore-Bick’s report that there were questions over the command structure, training and communications in London Fire Brigade, which all need to be addressed.

When there is an emergency, we are used to seeing—indeed we expect to see—our emergency services working seamlessly, both in teams within an individual service, but also in services working together. Sadly, on that fateful night, that was not the case. Now these were the most challenging of circumstances. None of us should take away from the fact that people were dealing with something that they had not seen the like of before and were having to respond with instant and split-second decisions. But there is absolutely no doubt from the report that the lack of communication and of the passing on of crucial information had an impact on the response. Sir Martin Moore-Bick states in the report:

“The chaotic nature of the communication links meant that neither the control room nor the command units nor the incident commander could know whether rescue attempts had been made in response to calls, or if they had, what had been the outcomes.”

That seamless working together is important within teams but also across the services. It is very important that when our emergency services attend an emergency, they are able to work together in the best possible way to deal with it.

When I was Home Secretary, I oversaw the work on the joint emergency services interoperability principles, or JESIP. The whole purpose of that work was to
ensure that there was a way of our emergency services working together that enabled them to provide the service we wanted them to provide. And yet on this night, a major incident was declared by each of the services at different times, but they did not communicate that to each other. Sir Martin Moore-Bick makes that point when he says:

“One of the consequences of the declaration of a Major Incident by the emergency services is that there should be a multi-agency conversation between the control room leads. This was a requirement of the joint operating requirements established under the Joint Doctrine...That was also a requirement of the Procedure Manual...The evidence that such a conversation...took place is at best unclear.”

This need to communicate is very important and it is absolutely right that Sir Martin Moore-Bick has raised it as an issue that needs to be addressed in his recommendations.

I want to comment on what in many ways must be the most heartbreaking aspect of the report for the survivors: the use of the doctrine “stay put”. I can quite understand why there was a doctrine of staying put. The experience was that a fire in a flat within a tower block would normally remain in that flat and would be able to be dealt with in that flat—compartmentalisation or containment within a flat. But of course that did not happen in this circumstance; something else happened because of the cladding on the outside of the building.

The doctrine of “stay put” had been developed for good reasons, based on the normal experiences of firefighters. The problem was not the fact that that was the doctrine in such circumstances; the problem was that there was no flexibility to know how to deal with and respond to different circumstances. As we see in the report, at a point in time—the Prime Minister referenced that point—a decision was taken to evacuate rather than to continue to operate the “stay put” doctrine, but even at that time the messages that were getting through were not clear and the messages being given by the control room were not as clear as they should have been. One of the issues here is making sure that there is training to ensure that those who are making decisions on the ground know that they have the flexibility to make a different decision, but also know when and how to exercise that flexibility.

This doctrine did have an impact. On the Friday after the fire I was visiting survivors in hospital, where I met one family, the father of which told me that he, his wife and child had been told to stay put in their flat and that others had been brought into their flat as a place of safety. There came a point when this father took the decision that they could no longer stay in the flat, so he said what he was going to do and took himself, his wife and his child out of their flat. They survived. The others did not. So this doctrine did have an impact that night.

The worst thing that could happen now would be to lurch to having everyone say, “We can’t have ‘stay put’ at all”, because there will be circumstances in which “stay put” is still the right advice to give. But what is important is that flexibility is provided, and that training is given so that individuals know when and how they can exercise that flexibility and change the advice.

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): If there is to be this change—a flexibility, under which there may be a full evacuation from time to time—would the right hon. Lady agree that it would be essential for buildings to have sprinkler systems, at least in communal areas, more than one means of escape and a central alarm system, and that Grenfell Tower would have benefited from those measures? Would she support those provisions being introduced in new buildings and retrofitted?

Mrs May: I have been asked about sprinklers on a number of occasions. Of course, the response to the Lakanal House fire was not that sprinklers should be fitted in all high tower blocks, but that the landlord should look at that issue. Sir Martin Moore-Bick is going to address the issue of sprinklers in part 2 of the inquiry, and he references that and makes the point that I have just made about the Lakanal House fire in this report. On the issue of the means of escape, there was a central stairway in Grenfell Tower, and I think firefighters have raised the question of the means of escape in that regard. This is another issue that part 2 of the inquiry is likely to look at, as it is looking at the requirements and regulations necessary for the future.

There are issues about the cladding itself and about the responsibility for why the fire was able to happen because of the circumstances of the building. I set up the inquiry to get to the truth, and Sir Martin Moore-Bick has shown that he is capable of and determined to get to the truth. His report so far has been clear and uncompromising, and I have every expectation that his report on part 2 of the inquiry will also be clear and uncompromising, whoever or whatever it needs to address.

I welcome the Government’s commitments, set out by the Prime Minister, to accept the recommendations, but change requires a willingness to change. I refer to paragraph 28.55 in volume 4 of the report, where Sir Martin Moore-Bick references the evidence of the Commissioner of the London Fire Brigade and says that he feels that it “only serves to demonstrate that the LFB is an institution at risk of not learning the lessons of the Grenfell Tower fire.”

For the families and friends of those who lost their lives, the pain of that loss will never go away. But for their sake, and in memory of all who lost their lives, the lessons must be learned.

Several hon. Members rose—
I welcome the publication of phase 1 of the reports, but I agree with the Leader of the Opposition when he says that this was an avoidable tragedy, and I will come back to that in a moment.

Before I say anything else, I want, like others, to pay tribute to the resilience of the survivors of this tragedy and the bereaved. Like many other hon. Members, I had the privilege, thanks to you, Mr Speaker, of meeting some of the survivors and bereaved at a reception in your offices. That was of great use to me in understanding their lived experience of this avoidable tragedy, which must be central to how we deal with preventing this sort of thing and ensuring that it never happens again.

As well as paying tribute to the fortitude and dignity of the families—the bereaved—and the survivors, I want, like others, to pay tribute to the bravery of individual firefighters. For most of us, it is really unfathomable that they had the courage to run back and forth in and out of that inferno. I believe that the bereaved families have had very warm words for the coroner, Fiona Wilcox, and tribute should be paid to her, as well as to Sir Martin Moore-Bick and his staff. Of course, tributes should also be paid, as others have said, to the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad), who had to deal with this terrible tragedy on her patch very shortly after she had been elected a Member of Parliament, and has been able to do so, again with great fortitude and resilience, because she knew the area so well.

It is important to remember that this is only phase 1 of the inquiry. Many have argued that perhaps the inquiry was the wrong way round and that phase 1 should have looked at the cause of the fire and phase 2 at the response. There is some force in that, but we are where we are. It is very important to look to the statement that the Fire Brigades Union made, pointing out:

“Before any firefighter arrived that night, Grenfell Tower was” already

“a death trap. Firefighters...acted bravely in impossible circumstances, many of them repeatedly risking their own lives to save others.”

Indeed, that is reflected in the report. The Fire Brigades Union goes on to say:

“The true culprits of the fire are those who wrapped the building in flammable cladding.”

It is good that the inquiry has recognised that, and I am sure that phase 2 will spend a lot more time looking at it. Also contributing to this avoidable tragedy were those who gutted the fire safety regime of the United Kingdom, who ignored the warnings from previous fires, and who did not hear the pleas of a community who were worried for their safety.

I cannot help thinking that the story of the avoidable tragedy of Grenfell is a modern tale of two cities. Do we really think that this carnage would have been allowed to happen if the residents of the tower were white, wealthy, middle and upper-class residents such as we find elsewhere in Kensington? Do we really think that the survivors and the bereaved would have waited so long for state support and rehousing if they had been white, wealthy and middle-class? Of course not. This divided city, and our divided society, have developed under the watch of the Conservative party. As others have pointed out, the Prime Minister was Mayor of this great city of London at the time when cuts were made to the fire brigade. There are issues of political responsibility that are properly the province of this House.

Jim Fitzpatrick: Some outside—I am not saying that the hon. and learned Lady is doing this—have said that the fire brigade differentiated its response because of the ethnicity of the people in the buildings. That is complete and utter nonsense, as I am sure she will agree. On her point about the social class of the people in the building, a number of colleagues have referred to the privately owned freehold buildings across the country that are not getting reclad. They are all private blocks that are owned by leaseholders. The social blocks have all been done—perhaps a little slower, but they have all been done. These people are mostly white middle-class, and they are in desperate need of their cladding being taken down and replaced.

Joanna Cherry: I cannot disagree with the hon. Gentleman’s second point, and I also agree with his first point. However, the point that I sought to make was that it has not gone unnoticed by many of us that the social class and ethnicity of the people who died in Grenfell Tower was very different from that of other people who live in the surrounding area, and there is a very strong suspicion that that has led to some of the shortcomings in this case.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): Will the hon. and learned Lady give way?

Joanna Cherry: No, I am going to make some progress.

When this House reassembles after general election 2019, we must not allow political blame for this avoidable tragedy to be deflected. The second phase of this inquiry, I believe, will be uncomfortable for Conservative Ministers and Conservative councillors who sat on their hands or took actions that let circumstances occur that contributed to this tragedy. I believe that phase 2 will be far more uncomfortable for them than phase 1 has been for the fire service—and that is as it should be.

I welcome the undertaking from the Prime Minister to implement all the recommendations for central Government, but I reiterate the question that other hon. Members have asked: will he commit to the requisite funding to implement those recommendations? In the past, many post-death inquiries have made very important recommendations, but there is not always national oversight of those recommendations. There is not a national body keeping track of whether they have been implemented, and the reality is that important recommendations often fall by the wayside.

Mr Betts: The hon. and learned Lady is making a very important point. Does she think that as soon as the Government, whichever Government it is, have had a chance to consider the recommendations in detail, they should publish a list of those recommendations, what they are going to do to implement them, how much that will cost, and the timeframe in which they will be delivered?

Joanna Cherry: That is an eminently sensible suggestion.

Others have mentioned Lakanal House. The hon. Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) pointed out that the tragedy at Grenfell was not the first time that compartmentation had failed. The Lakanal House fire, which resulted in the deaths of six people, with 15 residents and a firefighter injured, was the subject of a coroner’s inquest. As the hon. Gentleman said, the coroner sent a
rule 43 letter to the then Communities Secretary, Eric Pickles, on 28 March 2013, recommending that the Westminster Government should “publish consolidated national guidance in relation to the ‘stay put’ principle and its interaction with the ‘get out and stay out’ policy, including how such guidance is disseminated to residents.” Ministers promised to review that guidance with the Local Government Association. However, in the four years after the coroner’s letter, no guidance was produced.

So the lessons that should have been learned from the Lakanal House fire, and that might have prevented at least the scale of this avoidable tragedy, were not learned. It is vital that this House is empowered to make sure that the recommendations of phase 2 are implemented promptly, because important recommendations have not been implemented promptly in the past.

Mr Lammy: Does the hon. and learned Lady accept that what took place after the Lakanal House fire should have involved an examination of the Government of the day? That is not to be partisan, but simply to say that it is important that justice applies to everyone. The firemen are not here, but it is important that justice means that anyone, wherever they are and of whichever party—because it may have gone back many years—may be found culpable and must be able to answer for their failure on behalf of these people.

Joanna Cherry: I entirely agree. This is the job of the inquiry, but it is also the job of this House, as I said, to scrutinise the political responsibility for factors contributing to this tragedy.

In Scotland, building regulations are devolved. After a tower block fire in Irvine in 1999, just before devolution kicked in, a Select Committee of this House recommended that all cladding on high-rise dwellings should be non-combustible. Subsequent to devolution, that report was taken seriously by Scottish housing authorities, and building regulations in Scotland were duly amended in 2005. All new high rise domestic buildings in Scotland after that date were, by regulation, fitted with non-combustible cladding or a cladding system that met stringent fire tests, and with sprinklers. The same recommendation was seen as optional south of the border. It appears that that has had tragic consequences, so it is vital that this House finds a way to ensure that the inquiry’s recommendations are properly implemented.

It is also the case that a history of deregulation and its legacy has contributed to this tragedy. That history dates back many years and includes previous Conservative party Administrations’ decisions to cut building regulations drastically and the coalition Government’s cutting of fire budgets by around 28% in real terms. Those are facts. The fact is that the regulatory regime for housing and fire safety created in England has contributed to the scale of this tragedy.

I believe that the coalition Government’s policy of austerity has contributed to conditions surrounding the scale of this tragedy. I am conscious of not taking up too much time, so that others can speak, but Labour Members have mentioned cuts made by the Prime Minister to the London fire service when he was Mayor. I have read carefully comments from Matt Wrack, the general secretary of the Fire Brigades Union, who notes that a review of the London Fire Brigade’s resources in 2016 warned against any further cuts to its budget and advised that City Hall “be ready to mitigate any unacceptable negative impacts arising from cuts in frontline resources” made by the then Mayor, the Prime Minister. Those allegations come from somebody who knows what he is talking about.

Despite those concerns, the Prime Minister, when he was Mayor of London, went on to insist to Londoners that he had improved fire cover, despite cutting the number of firefighters, fire engines and fire stations. When confronted in the Greater London Assembly chamber about that matter, he told a Labour party Assembly Member to “get stuffed”. I am sorry for that language, Madam Deputy Speaker, but that is a fact, and I have seen the video. It is a great indictment of our politics that that sort of approach to such serious matters is seen as acceptable by some.

As the charity Shelter has said, this tragedy outlines the fact that we need a national conversation about some of the broader policy issues, particularly social housing. In Scotland, even under the constraints of Tory and Lib Dem austerity, we have taken steps to build tens of thousands of new social homes. We have got rid of the right to buy, built council houses and reintroduced security of tenure in the private sector. Those things are all widely accepted in other European democracies, and we need to look at improving them in England and Wales.

Finally, the families must never be forgotten. Working with the organisation Inquest, the families have produced a blueprint for the handling of future disasters. They have called in particular for a co-ordinated response from central and local government and emergency services. They have also recommended that a central point be set up for families to contact about missing relatives and for help and information. The views of the families, whose lived experience is central to our consideration of this avoidable tragedy, must be put at the heart of any work that the next Parliament takes forward, to put right the terrible wrong that occurred on that night.

3.3 pm

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is always a pleasure to follow the hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West (Joanna Cherry). Grenfell is a tragedy that should never have happened, and the likes of it must never happen again. I welcome any report that allows us to learn lessons for the future, but we must not simply learn; we must follow through and apply those lessons. Unfortunately, given the timing of the phase 1 report’s release, I have been unable to read the 1,000 or so pages of the four volumes. That said, as a former firefighter and senior officer in Strathclyde fire brigade, I feel compelled to make a short contribution to this important debate.

I want to take a moment to set the record straight. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South West referred to the wealth of the individuals concerned. Firefighters the length and breadth of the United Kingdom will do their very best, irrespective of people’s colour, wealth, religion or gender. It is uniform throughout the UK. We will do our best, irrespective of where people live. If they ask for our assistance, they will get it.
On that dreadful night, firefighters did not set out to fail; and nor did they fail. I am relieved that the inquiry, in its report published today, is not overtly critical of the frontline firefighters, but rather highlights systemic failures. Firefighters respond where others would fear to tread, often putting their own lives on the line. A question I would ask, assuming that the media coverage is accurate, is: why are we regrettably seeing a pattern emerging of the same or similar systemic failures or shortcomings, from which lessons are apparently not being learned and with no timely action being taken to rectify such failures?

We live in a world where scientific developments and technological advances aim to enhance our safety. That may lead us all on occasions to feel a false sense of security. Indeed, perhaps too often we take such matters at face value and for granted. In the fire and rescue service, there are often specialist divisions, such as fire safety, fire investigation and fire engineering. However, regrettably, fire certification by fire services has given way to fire risk assessments being conducted simply by responsible persons. There needs to be sufficient exchange of relevant information, particularly to the frontline fire crews and operational commanders, including appropriate familiarisation training and support for those who may, in their firefighting role, have less cause to visit, inspect and become familiar with premises.

Many of those improvements have led to a reduction in the number of recorded fires. As a result, practical experience at incidents, as opposed to on fireground training, is in decline, and that gap needs to be addressed. My hon. Friend the Member for The Cotswolds (Sir Geoffrey Clifton-Brown) mentioned the Fire Service College at Moreton-in-Marsh, which is a wonderful facility. Under the stewardship of the then chief officer, Brian Sweeney, my old service—the Strathclyde fire and rescue service—built a wonderful, modern training facility at Cambuslang in Scotland.

For many years, compartmentalisation has been seen as offering, in effect, a safe refuge. It has worked well on many occasions, but we have learned the hard way that it may not necessarily offer a safe refuge, due in no small way to construction materials and subsequent modifications that may involve original fire-stopping or fire spread-limiting measures being compromised.

Jim Fitzpatrick: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way; I call him my hon. Friend because there is an affinity and comradeship between ex-firefighters. In London alone, there have been 5,000 high-rise fires since 2014, and compartmentalisation worked in the vast majority of those. That is not an excuse for the London Fire Brigade not taking evacuation action earlier, but it explains why people arrived at the scene conditioned to expect a certain action, and Grenfell did not act like a normal building.

Bill Grant: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. He is correct. In Glasgow, where there are many high-rise flats, that policy has worked well, but as I will come on to say, we need a bit of flexibility. I firmly believe—I think he would share this view—that the events that night at Grenfell were exceptional. They were not normal; they were an extreme. It was a very difficult fire for any responding firefighters or senior officer to manage well.

While rules, procedures and practices are needed for health and safety, they require to be applied in such a manner that we do not stifle freedom of thought. One of the greatest assets in my early days as a firefighter was the use of initiative and improvisation. To some extent, that has been curtailed over time by the fear of disciplinary action, of being sued in an increasingly litigious society, or of departing from the perceived norm or any policy of long standing. Policies are often quite rigid and lack the flexibility that takes account of the inexact science of firefighting and the unpredictability of both fire and human behaviour.

The greatest question of all is: who was informed, and what revised fire risk assessment took place when the whole dynamic and risks presented at Grenfell changed? A high-rise building was draped in flammable cladding and became an inferno, costing the lives of 72 individuals. Their deaths must not be in vain. I would just comment that, as we speak today in this Chamber, there are still flaws in the building regulations in Scotland. We can still apply flammable cladding. I hope that the Scottish Government will put that right; I am sure that they will.

My sympathies go to the families of those who lost their lives in the Grenfell tragedy, but my sympathies also go to the families of the frontline firefighters, who have to deal with their loved one’s experiences on that dreadful night of 14 June 2017, together with external pressures from very intense public scrutiny. Grenfell must be a catalyst for change and secure improvements for fire safety and firefighting not only for the London fire brigade, but for the whole of the UK. Finally, I thank Sir Martin and those who gave evidence and shared their experience of that dreadful night, which will haunt many for years to come.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order. As the next speaker is the constituency MP, I will remove the time limit, but I know the hon. Lady is aware of the time pressures. I call Emma Dent Coad.

Emma Dent Coad (Kensington) (Lab): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker, for allowing me to overrun the time limit.

There is one finding in this 1,000 page document that I welcome without hesitation: my former neighbour whose Hotpoint fridge freezer burst into flames, the match lighting a bonfire created by others, is entirely blameless and, indeed, did everything he could and should have done to alert the emergency services and his neighbours. He has been vilified by the gutter press, not by our community, and I would welcome an opportunity to reunite him with the neighbours he was advised—wrongly, I believe—never to speak to again, at huge personal cost to himself. Another point I welcome with some hesitation is that the building was non-compliant at the time of the fire. This finding, although very welcome, is left hanging with no commentary and no resolution.

Much of the rest of this story is, in my opinion, a litany of vested interest protecting itself. How very disappointing it is that the inquiry has to a certain extent gone along with this narrative, as we feared. I do hope people will bear with me, but I did not have the
benefit of having the full report on Monday morning, as The Daily Telegraph seems to have done. I will be giving a visceral response, and I will give a more measured response in time to come, when I have absorbed all the details of the report.

For me—and I have spent a mere four hours reading the documents—one of the worst of many disappointments is the naming of some of the firefighters who, as has already been said, risked their lives in a bonfire made by corporate greed and by the disdain and complacency of politicians over many years. To create some balance and to point the finger of blame as I personally see it, I am naming some of those at the top of the pyramid of responsibility.

I am going to start with the chief executive of Arconic, which makes the cladding, Chip Blankenship, who, when he left in 2017, had a going-away present of $17.5 million, which is 500 times the earnings of a firefighter who ran into a bonfire that he was potentially responsible for. The chief executive of Whirlpool now, Marc Bitzer, who manufactured the now banned plastic fridge freezer that burst into flames and lit the bonfire, was on record as earning $11.8 million, which is 300 times as much as firefighters. The chief executive of Celotex, Pierre-André de Chalendar, made a mere £4 million from salary and dividends, and the chief executive of Rydon, Robert Bond, who constructed the bonfire of now banned combustible products—and did a pretty shoddy job of it from what we gather, with gaps creating chimneys, badly fitting windows and dodgy fixings, some fitted upside down which encouraged the fire to spread—earned a mere £2 million, which is a mere 80 times that of firefighters. All these men are responsible to some extent for the events of 14 June 2017, but if they are named at all, it will not be for two years, when their army of lawyers will have created a firewall between them and any degree of accountability.

I also name the Prime Minister who, as Mayor of London, was responsible for the brutal cuts that weakened the fire service and forced it to economise, and who, in his current role, will potentially happen allow further cuts to an already depleted service. I do hope that Ministers will deny that. When, as the Mayor, he was challenged about the cuts—at the time I was fighting and I fought very hard, for North Ken fire station, as has already been said, risked their lives in a bonfire made by corporate greed and by the disdain and complacency of politicians over many years. To create some balance and to point the finger of blame as I personally see it, I am naming some of those at the top of the pyramid of responsibility.

I also name the Prime Minister who, as Mayor of London, was responsible for the brutal cuts that weakened the fire service and forced it to economise, and who, in his current role, will potentially happily allow further cuts to an already depleted service. I do hope that Ministers will deny that. When, as the Mayor, he was challenged about the cuts—at the time I was fighting and I fought very hard, for North Ken fire station, which I hope we have managed to save—he, as we have heard, emitted a foul expletive, just to show his disdain for the concerns of his fellow human beings.

I also name the current chair of the Conservative party, James Cleverly, who, as the then chair of the London Fire and Emergency Planning Authority, presided over those very same cuts and takes no responsibility for the outcome of those cuts. He did nothing in the aftermath of the Lakanal House fire of 2009 in which six people died.

Eddie Hughes (Walsall North) (Con): May I just check whether, in line with the standard protocol, the hon. Lady advised my right hon. Friend the Member for Brantree (James Cleverly), whom she has referred to by name rather than by constituency, that she would mention him in her speech?

Madam Deputy Speaker: I am not sure whether the hon. Lady used an actual name, but if so, that would be incorrect. The right hon. Gentleman was here earlier, but I am sure she will bear in mind that it is important not to refer to right hon. and hon. Members by name.

Emma Dent Coad: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I would also like to name the previous Fire Ministers and Housing Ministers Brandon Lewis and Gavin Barwell, and Eric Pickles, the then Secretary of State, who turned a deaf ear to pleas about the fire cuts, as well as our current Fire Minister, whom I have had many conversations with. I feel that I have spent two years—I apologise for this—shouting into a void.

I also name the former Kensington and Chelsea cabinet member in charge of the refurbishment, Rock Feilding-Mellen, a man whom we have no love for in North Kensington. He abandoned his fourth home, a modest London crash-pad, which he had bought for cash, that now overlooks the shrouds of the Grenfell Tower he was so keen to improve the appearance of. He is a man who called my beautiful Golborne ward a “ghetto”, but he can sleep at night safe in one of his three stately homes, one of which appears to be a castle.

It is these people—cushioned by their millions, devoid of any conscience, protected by taxpayer-funded legal teams, reputation advisers and empathy coaches—who are the guilty ones here. They sleep easy in their beds, while half of North Kensington, including myself, have sleepless nights broken by nightmares, and tens of thousands of our fellow human beings across the country live in dangerous buildings, some of whom have put their life savings into them—all lost. Those I have named and the system they represent built a bonfire, lit the match and stood by wagging their fingers as firefighters, ill-trained and ill-equipped for a situation that should never have happened, ran into an inferno to save lives.

This interim report has failed us, as far as I am concerned. It does nothing to protect people tonight or into the future. In addition to protecting corporate interests and declining to look into potential dodgy dealings or even possible corruption, which is for police to investigate, it fails even to support the recommendations that would stop this man-made atrocity happening again. There are some things that could have been done at this stage, and they have not been done. Why should we wait another two years for that? These failures of corporate interests, the complicity of politicians over many years and the failures of this report mean, to my mind, that Grenfell 2 could happen tomorrow. I wonder whether they, if their children were living in a flat in the sky wrapped in solid petrol, would wake up to the potential disaster and legislate now.
Kevin Hollinrake (Thirsk and Malton) (Con): The hon. Lady is making some fair points, but there have been failures over decades in terms of free regulation in relation to fire, and is it helpful at this point in time simply to use this issue in a party political perspective, as she is doing? This is about failures of previous Governments and, one could argue, failures of the current Government. Nevertheless, this should not be about party politics.

Emma Dent Coad: I acknowledge that, and I have not pointed to any parties at all. Indeed, there has been complacency and failure over many, many years.

If we wait another two years, we will see another Grenfell, and a finger of blame will point at the Government and their failures to act, and at this interim report. “Stay put” was the correct advice in Grenfell Tower for 45 years, until the building’s safety was compromised by a refurbishment designed by five years of bad decision making. This is a national Government policy that the fire services have been asking be reviewed for particular buildings for many years, ever since the first cladding fires. Firefighters are being blamed for Government policy failures and the Government still refuse to review the policy—it is “in due course”—because to do so would be, I believe, an admission of guilt.

I hope that the Government will reconsider and take immediate action. This is urgent. We must deal with safety and building regulations without delay. If another Grenfell happens, the Government will have knowingly sent residents and firefighters to their deaths. Let that be on their conscience and in their nightmares forever.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Just a reminder that if right hon. and hon. Members are to refer to other right hon. or hon. Members who have not been in the debate, they should give them notice of that. I now impose a four-minute time limit.

3.22 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I commend my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister on the content and tone of his speech. I was appalled that this report was leaked two days in advance, and I was extremely worried that the fire brigade would be used as an excuse and blamed. That is quite wrong. I spoke to the fire brigade and found that it has dealt with internal learning and improvement, predetermined attendance, new equipment, training, control improvements, information gathering and other matters.

The reality is that Parliament is to blame, because over many years we have not prioritised this issue at all. Of course, we come together when there is such a tragedy, but over many years Parliament has not prioritised the situation. I gently say to colleagues that we have all been sent emails about fire training measures in this place, but I am afraid that the take-up among colleagues is relatively small, and I hope that we will do better.

We are all aware that when the fire brigade has to attend a fire the magnitude of Grenfell, that is because of a failure in the building system, which according to Dame Judith Hackitt is seriously broken and not fit for purpose. As we have heard, phase 2 of the public inquiry will commence next year and look at the original design, construction and composition of the tower and the subsequent modifications both prior to and during 2012 to 2016, including compliance with regulations and guidance and industry practice.

I only wish that we in the all-party parliamentary fire safety rescue group had been listened to many years ago. I am delighted that the group has three Members who were Ministers and two firefighters, all of whom make excellent contributions. Our group will be represented at stage 2 of the public inquiry by the group’s adviser, former chief fire officer Ronnie King.

As I said, the fire tragedy that unfolded at Grenfell Tower cannot be laid at the door of the firefighters. I have had only a brief opportunity to look at the 1,000-page report, but I want to pick out one or two words. Sir Martin Moore-Bick says that the London Fire Brigade’s readiness for the Grenfell fire was “gravely inadequate”. He stated that “incident commanders had received no training in how to recognise the need for an evacuation or how to organise one”.

Her Majesty’s inspectorate of fire services really should be picking up that sort of thing. Whether it failed to notice it or just failed to act is a matter of grave concern.

There was no contingency plan for the evacuation of Grenfell Tower. Assurances had been provided following the 2013 inquest into Lakanal House that this kind of issue had been resolved. It clearly had not. The London Fire Brigade has an operational database of buildings in London and has a risk assessment policy accessible to all operational firefighters. The information available about Grenfell Tower contained almost nothing of any use to an incident commander called to a fire. I also understand that what was there did not reflect the significant refurbishment work that had gone on. Once again, Her Majesty’s inspectorate really should have picked up that shortcoming. The first incident commanders, although experienced, were of relatively junior rank. They were faced with a situation for which they had not been adequately prepared, and I know the fire service will look at that.

We should not argue any more about this. We should ensure that the cladding is dealt with everywhere in private and public buildings, we should ensure that sprinklers are retrospectively fitted, and we should ensure that a tragedy such as Grenfell never ever happens again.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. I am sorry; after the next speaker, I will have to reduce the time limit to three minutes.

3.25 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I thank the Prime Minister for the tone in which he opened the debate, the former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), for setting up the inquiry in the first place, and Sir Martin Moore-Bick and his inquiry team for the detailed work they have done. I also thank the hon. Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad). It is entirely understandable that the community is angry and wants justice. She expressed that, and she is right to do so. When she says this is urgent, she is absolutely right.
Nobody could not be moved by the horror of reading or listening to the testimonies of those who experienced that fateful night: the horror of people being trapped in a burning building, or of knowing that their loved ones were. In the report they then read the heartbreaking finding that advice to stay put was given to people who could otherwise have escaped, and that led to loss of life.

There are so many lessons to be learnt, but the truth is that the people who survived, and their friends and family, bear this burden every single day, as do those from our emergency services. There are the firefighters who bravely ran into danger in that hellish building—that inferno. There are those who gave medical support to the people who were affected, and those who picked up the pieces in the community, including people in the education service. I am struck by the story of the young woman who escaped from the tower and the next day went to set her GCSE chemistry exam. The reach of Grenfell, with the number of people whose lives were affected, or who have helped those affected, is huge. It continues to this day.

The report makes it absolutely clear that the Grenfell tragedy was the result of several institutional failings. Simply put, it should not have happened. We need solutions now to ensure that it can never happen again—from local authorities having emergency planning procedures and risk assessments to the fire service having the support needed on lessons that must be learned about communication. It is also about the regulations made in this place about cladding and materials, the rules that we have for buildings, and learning the lessons from previous tragedies such as Lakanal House.

Everyone deserves a safe and secure home to live in, and, bluntly, the residents of Grenfell did not have that. It is unacceptable that that cladding was ever approved for use on buildings such as Grenfell. In part of the report, Sir Martin Moore-Bick finds that it is hard to understand whether it could ever have been compliant with building regulations— it is important that that is fully investigated in phase 2—yet 200 buildings still have that cladding today. People are going to sleep in buildings where that is the case. That is not good enough two and a half years on.

It is incredibly important that the next phase of the inquiry can proceed. It needs to be comprehensive and detailed, and it needs to do its work as quickly as possible, but the very fact that that cladding is still there on buildings more than two years on should shock us all. It is long past time that we matched our words with actions.

3.29 pm

**Jim Fitzpatrick** (Poplar and Limehouse) (Lab): I am grateful for the opportunity to make a brief contribution to this debate, and I am honoured to follow the hon. Member for East Dunbartonshire (Jo Swinson).

I need to start by acknowledging the grief, pain and anger of the bereaved and the survivors from Grenfell. No one can be anything other than deeply saddened at the huge loss of life. Anything other than complete condemnation of this event is unacceptable. No one escapes their share of the blame from Grenfell. This includes the London Fire Brigade, and I speak as a former operational firefighter with the brigade. London Fire Brigade is not hiding from the criticism levelled at it, but the catastrophic failure that is Grenfell was not caused by the London Fire Brigade, which did its best to deal with it. Compartmentalisation normally works. I have fought high-rise fires, and I am sure that the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) has, too. It has saved countless lives over many years, but Grenfell was not compartmentalised. The building failure led to London Fire Brigade making many mistakes of which, I am sure, it is absolutely ashamed and that it regrets deeply.

Responsibility for what happened lies with us here in Parliament, with the Government and with many others—local government, building suppliers, construction companies and the rest. The focus of the inquiry is, in phase 1, on the initial evidence supplied by witnesses called by the inquiry. Subsequent phases will apportion more responsibility to a wider number of organisations and individuals. I believe therefore that the criticism of London Fire Brigade has to be viewed with that perspective—that there is a bigger picture and that it will subsequently be uncovered. I am very grateful to the Prime Minister for his kind words about London Fire Brigade, to the Leader of the Opposition and to Sir Martin Moore-Bick for commending the brigade’s bravery in his report.

The conspiracy theorists have had a field day, and I am grateful to my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) for putting on record that the resident who suffered from the fire and was vilified for it has been proved to be completely innocent. There were accusations that London Fire Brigade had used different operational firefighting techniques because of ethnicity, as well as accusations of cover-up and that the body count was not accurate; all these things are not only offensive but insulting to everyone involved in firefighting all the way through.

Nobody can deal with the pain of the survivors or bring back the victims. What we all have to do is to learn the lessons; I believe that London Fire Brigade has, and it is obvious that that is already being demonstrated. I say to the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government that cladding is still a huge issue, both in terms of safety and policy.

Finally, I thank the inquiry. People said that it would not get to the truth and that it would be a whitewash. I had faith that it would never be that, and the inquiry has demonstrated that it is digging, and digging deep. There is a lot more to do, but the first phase demonstrates that the inquiry knows what happened and is telling the world.

3.32 pm

**Mr Clive Bets** (Sheffield South East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick), perhaps making his last speech in this House. I thank him for his friendship over the years and his unwavering commitment to fire safety. He will certainly be remembered for that. I also thank my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) for her outstanding work on behalf of her constituents. This disaster happened shortly after she had been elected, and I do not think that anyone in this country could have had better representation through the difficulties that the community faced and the work that she has done on their behalf.
I thank Sir Martin Moore-Bick for his recommendations in the inquiry. Of course, they need to be implemented and the funding needs to be made available. To pick out certain salient points, it is very clear that the cladding on that building did not meet fire or building regulations. It was there illegally. Eventually, the inquiry will look at how it came to be in that situation, but at some point someone will have to be held accountable because if that material had not been on that building, the disaster would not have happened. That is absolutely key.

The second issue, a concern to which Sir Martin draws attention in paragraph 33.6, is the delay in getting action in removing this cladding from other buildings. Indeed, the Secretary of State has said that he has concerns about that. The Government were too late in providing funding for social housing and in providing money for the private sector. They now have to act to make sure that disputes between freeholders and leaseholders in the private sector do not lead to further delays and to support local authorities in taking enforcement action.

What can the Government do? We referred to this in the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee the other day: they should act quickly to deal with the conflicts of interest in testing, where producers go round from one testing organisation to another to find one that will approve their product with no public transparency about the products that have failed various tests. That must be rectified quickly.

As I said to the Secretary of State the other day, the process whereby developers in high-risk buildings can appoint their friends to be the building inspectors who sign off the work is not acceptable. It cannot be allowed to continue. I have referenced a block of student accommodation in Sheffield evacuated the other day because the building inspector had not even been on site to give approval to the building and sign it off. That, again, needs to be stopped here and now.

Finally, reference has been made to non-ACM cladding. There are materials on half a million properties—half a million flats and apartments—in this country now that would not be allowed and approved on a new building but that are thought acceptable, and people have to stay in those homes and live in them at night. That cannot be right either; that needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency as well.

3.35 pm

Mr David Lammy (Tottenham) (Lab): I am very grateful to have the opportunity to contribute to this debate.

Khadija Saye, my friend who died, was Facebooking her friends at 1.47 that night. I now know, as a result of this inquiry and the review by the fire brigade, that firemen were on the 20th floor of Grenfell Tower at 2 am. I so wish that those fire officers—and I am sure the public servants such as firefighters, who worked incredibly hard to save people.

But we are not really talking about a tragedy; we are talking about what many see as a crime. For that reason, I look forward to the next phase of this inquiry. I look forward to establishing whether companies like Arconic, Rydon, Celotex and Whirlpool, leaders of the local authority, mayors and Ministers will be held to account for the decisions that were made.

I also look forward to the Metropolitan police’s inquiry and review of the evidence and the prosecutions that many of us hope will follow. I said on the day afterwards that this was corporate manslaughter, and it cannot be right that people with lots of money escape justice if they are culpable. So, yes, to the inquiry, but also to the Metropolitan police examination of this issue.

Everything I do in relation to this is in memory of that wonderful young woman who had so much to offer this country and lost her life in what was a preventable fire and all those victims and survivors who deserved better from the country in which they lived.

3.38 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Let me start by joining other Members in commemorating the 72 people who lost their lives in the Grenfell tragedy, which was completely needless: it was a man-made disaster. I also want to acknowledge the tireless efforts of community organisations but, most importantly, of public servants such as firefighters, who worked incredibly hard to save people.

As others have pointed out, the issue with ACM cladding affects many thousands of residents across the country, in social housing as well as in private housing blocks. My constituency has among the largest number of ACM-clad blocks, and Tower Hamlets as a whole probably has the most blocks. Families are living in fear of their lives because of the failure of the Government to take urgent action. After continuous campaigning with Inside Housing, Grenfell United, the survivors and colleagues across the House, some funding has been provided, but it is not enough and it does not address the wider systemic failures that the Grenfell fire disaster exposed. That is why we have continually called on the Government to ensure that the resources are available and to take action to go after private freehold owners of private blocks, because our constituents are being left to take that fight to them. It has been over two and a half years, and very few of those blocks have had work undertaken on them to remove cladding. The lack of urgency from the Government is extremely worrying, because we all have to deal with the spectre of other fires that have taken place since Grenfell and the risk of further fires and disasters happening if action is not taken quickly.

In addition, the Government’s actions to deregulate have meant that residents do not have recourse to the support necessary to deal with problems when they arise. I ask Ministers to urgently address that matter rather than waiting for the inquiry’s further findings and reports to come out. The Government know what the problems are. They know that these actions can be taken immediately to provide remedy and reassurance to our constituents and the resources that are required to ensure that they can live in safety.
My final point is that, instead of constantly making excuses, the Government should ensure that they take action. That is what we all expect. That is what the survivors of Grenfell expect, and it is what the victims deserve.

3.41 pm

Karen Lee (Lincoln) (Lab): The tragic, avoidable loss of life in the Grenfell Tower disaster seared into our national consciousness as a shocking example of corporate greed and governmental complacency. The firefighters who responded on the night acted with commendable courage and professionalism, and yet, by choosing to focus on the fire and emergency services in its first phase, the inquiry has made a scapegoat of those who risked their lives to save others. The Labour party welcomes a thorough investigation into the disaster, and it is important that the LFB recognises where there were issues and where it can improve, but firefighters who go into burning buildings to save others must not be blamed for this disaster. I am particularly concerned by the inquiry’s unprecedented decision to name individual firefighters—I think that is shocking.

To deliver justice for the community, we must hold to account those who repeatedly ignored expert advice, deregulated building safety laws and allowed such dangerous materials to be fitted. This inquiry ought to have considered what led to the catastrophic fire at Grenfell before it looked at events on the night. Any recommendations should be implemented and fully funded, but nationally, not just in London. The inquiry’s report confirmed that the 2016 refurbishment of Grenfell Tower was catastrophically non-compliant with fire safety regulations. It also confirmed that the flammable cladding was a primary cause of the rapid spread of the fire, contrary to evidence given by the manufacturer. It took just 12 minutes for the fire to spread 19 floors to the roof.

The Government had been consistently warned about the danger of high-rise residential fires, and the coroner’s report on the Lakanal House fire in 2013 recommended a review of the “stay put” policy, retrofitting sprinklers and clear guidance on compartmentalisation, but the Government ignored that expert advice and failed to act.

In the two years since the disaster, the Government have let down Grenfell survivors with inadequate housing—that is disgraceful. They have dragged their heels on safety regulations and left people to live in unsafe buildings. The only meaningful reform of building regulations has been a ban of combustible materials on select buildings. There has been no review of “stay put”, nothing to ensure that sprinklers are installed and no widespread reform of building regulations. The deep and damaging cuts to our fire service continue. It is time that the Government—or perhaps the next Government—put people before profit and that we prioritised delivering justice for the local community and confronted the ongoing fire safety threat to communities across the UK.

I have only a few seconds left, so I just say this: we are all analysing what happened on the night, but my feelings are for the families and bereaved who are affected. Let us all spare them a thought today—they are certainly at the forefront of my thoughts.

3.44 pm

Ms Karen Buck (Westminster North) (Lab): The inquiry and the Government’s wider response had two obligations. One was to get justice for the families and survivors of the Grenfell disaster, and the other was to make sure that nothing like this could ever happen again. I welcome Martin Moore-Bick finding as a matter of fact that the content of the ACM cladding was the principal reason the flames spread so rapidly on the outside of the building. That clarity provides us with a helpful basis for stage 2 of the inquiry, however frustrated the community and survivors feel, quite understandably, about the length of the process.

The fact is, however, that far too many people are still living in properties with either ACM or other flammable cladding. For example, it was confirmed this summer that in London alone 315 joint inspections had taken place between the London Fire Brigade and local authority housing officers of tall residential buildings with flammable cladding. Some 26 of those were in my borough of Westminster—the third highest in London after Tower Hamlets and Greenwich. Those people are living in fear in blighted accommodation. This week, The Times has confirmed its findings that there are half a million owners of properties in the private sector who cannot sell or remortgage their properties because of the uncertainty over Government advice. This is having incredibly damaging consequences for their lives and mental health. We need greater speed. We do not have to wait for stage 2 of the inquiry to make progress in removing flammable cladding.

The Government have also failed to tackle some of the consequences of the complexities around properties with multiple tenure, such as council blocks with some privately owned properties in them, which is one reason there has been so little progress on the retrofitting of sprinklers. Westminster Council was going to make progress on that, but could not do so, and still cannot do so, because there remains a lack of clarity about its rights to enter those properties.

Finally, the Government promised us a wholesale rethinking of the attitude towards social tenants. Social tenancy was part of the approach to be reviewed. We have seen nothing of that change in attitude. Only this week, we saw it from the ex-councillor from Barnet, Brian Coleman, on the “Victoria Derbyshire” show, showing complete contempt for council tenants in temporary accommodation. It is really important that in addition to making the essential progress on fire safety, we carry through this rethink of our whole attitude towards social tenants.

3.47 pm

Andy Slaughter (Hammersmith) (Lab): With hindsight, I think we could have had part 2 of the inquiry first, because those are the difficult and complex issues of culpability that need to be addressed. Although there are policy issues such as “stay put” that come out of part 1, there is also a concentration on individual action. I agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad), whom I, too, compliment on the role she has played: I would rather the politicians and the corporate chisellers had been identified.

Very little progress has been made on cladding. I have read the briefings for this debate from the Royal Institute of British Architects, the London Fire Brigade and Rockwool. Yes, there is a ban on combustible cladding
on high-rise residential buildings over 18 metres, but what about non-residential high-rise buildings, including hotels and offices? What about high-risk buildings under 18 metres, such as schools, hospitals, care homes and sheltered housing, and what about the range of materials? It is not just ACM cladding: there is now the high-pressure laminate cladding and many other types. The Government have only scratched the surface of these matters.

On the “stay put” policy, I intervened on the former Prime Minister because I hoped she might agree and say not just that these things might be in the inquiry, but that, if there is a problem fitting sprinklers in leasehold properties, at least they could be put in communal areas. One cannot vary the “stay put” policy unless there is a reliable means of evacuation, which requires more than one means of escape. Planning consent is being given now for tower blocks in my constituency built on the Grenfell model with one central staircase. That has to change. We have to have alarm systems.

We also have to crack down on product safety. A block of flats in my constituency, Shepherds Court, which was not compartmentalised, caught fire a year before Grenfell. That fire was also caused by a defective white good manufactured by the Whirlpool corporation. We need to be much tighter on these issues.

My final point goes beyond the Moore-Bick inquiry, but it concerns a matter that the Government have themselves highlighted. I have as yet seen no sign of a changed attitude towards social housing generally. Less than a mile from Grenfell are the West Kensington Gibbs Green estates, which, through the collusion of developers and Conservative politicians, have been blighted for 10 years. Two thousand people live in those homes without any security because of the greed of developers, who are now suffering because of the current climate. I should like the Secretary of State to go down to those estates with me, and see whether that changed attitude can apply not just to fire safety in Grenfell but across the board in social housing.

3.50 pm

Mr Steve Reed (Croydon North) (Lab/Co-op): The Government have never fully accepted their responsibility for failings in the building fire safety regulations. The lack of clarity in those regulations was identified by the coroner at the inquest following the fatal Lakanal House fire as long ago as 2013, but Ministers failed to act. That lack of clarity meant that fire safety tests on cladding and insulation combinations were unreliable. Builders, developers, architects, planners—none of them knew with any certainty whether materials, or combinations of materials, were safe or complied with the regulations when they went up on buildings. A series of Ministers who were directly responsible for the failure to correct the problem were later rewarded with promotions, including to the Cabinet. That tells the victims’ families that this Government do not care, when Ministers are rewarded for such serious errors of judgment.

The Government have now announced, belatedly, a partial ban on flammable cladding on some new buildings, but they are still allowing it to go up on schools, hospitals and residential blocks less than six storeys high, and on hotels. I cannot imagine a single parent who would be happy to know that their child’s school was covered in flammable cladding, but the Government do not seem to think that it is a problem.

The former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), rightly expressed and echoed concerns that fire safety issues raised by Grenfell Tower residents had been ignored. How much more shocking, then, that we continue to ignore issues raised by thousands of families who are still living in blocks covered in flammable cladding today. That is, quite simply, negligence on a grand scale.

The Government’s main objective throughout all this seems to have been to absolve themselves of blame, not to right the wrongs for which they are responsible. Far too many people are still stranded in potentially dangerous homes, facing bills that they cannot afford to pay for failures that have absolutely nothing to do with them, and that is simply not acceptable. I am left wondering, the victims are left wondering, and thousands of people living in accommodation of this type are left wondering what more needs to happen before this negligent Government finally take the necessary action to keep every home safe from the kind of tragedy that so horrifically destroyed 72 lives at Grenfell Tower.

3.53 pm

Matt Rodda (Reading East) (Lab): I commend what was said by my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) and what has been said by many other Members, particularly the Leader of the Opposition. Let me also pause for a moment to convey my sincere tribute and deepest sympathies to the families who have been through the most appalling, absolutely dreadful experience over the past two years.

I want to reinforce some of the points made by colleagues from London, but also to make the point that this is a national problem, and a very serious one. It affects towns and cities throughout the United Kingdom. In my own area, Reading, several thousand people live in blocks of flats, some of which are very tall, and there is a significant expansion in the number of towers in the town. Those who travel there by train will see that a huge new tower block is being built right next to the station. There are plans for another enormous tower block on top of the Butts Centre, and the process is continuing as we rapidly urbanise and become more like an outer-London borough. Yet at the same time we face significant problems with cladding, and other fire safety issues which have not been fully discussed here today.

Immediately after Grenfell, four blocks with the unsafe cladding Members have been describing were identified in our town. Some of that is being rectified only now, two years after the disaster. Is it not awful that, in the fifth wealthiest country in the world, we cannot get our act together to solve such problems in a medium-sized, wealthy town?

To make matters worse, new problems are being discovered all the time. In the past few weeks, in a development that was finished in the late 2000s or perhaps 2013, a block containing 200 to 300 people was identified as having dangerous cladding of a different type from the kind we have been discussing today. There is also a series of other problems. I was briefed about this by Royal Berkshire Fire and Rescue Service, to whom I pay tribute along with other colleagues in the fire service around the country. It was deeply worried about a whole series of related and interconnected problems in building safety that are not being addressed by central Government. The fire brigade felt that it did
not have the resources or the powers to intervene, and it was unable to get the necessary support from building control because the regulations had been stripped away. This is very serious.

I can give examples of poor conversions in which builders have unwittingly knocked through partition walls, allowing the potential for fire to spread through large blocks without any interruption. There was a case of that in Slough that the fire service was deeply concerned about. As my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North said, fire services are also concerned about the cladding on a whole range of other buildings, including commercial buildings, schools and health buildings. They are also worried about the serious problems of houses in multiple occupation, including conversions over chip shops or takeaway premises. Some of these are deeply unsatisfactory, because a fire could easily be caused by the business premises. There are also examples of Victorian buildings in densely populated areas being wrongly converted. [Interuption.] I appreciate the pressure on time, Madam Deputy Speaker. Thank you so much for letting me make these points. I call on the Government to act urgently.

3.56 pm

Graham Morris (Easington) (Lab): I am pleased to be able to speak in this important debate. I wish to declare an interest as a member and co-chair of the Fire Brigades Union parliamentary group. I would like to thank members of the FBU who gave up their time this week to brief me and other MPs on the implications of the report, and to speak to us about their concerns. I would also like to pay tribute to my good and hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) for her work, her remarkable personal courage and her bravery in naming the names that need to be named, and more generally for the work that she has done following the tragedy. I want to acknowledge and pay my respects to the victims and their families and, indeed, to the whole community of Grenfell and to all those who have been terribly touched by the tragedy. I also want to acknowledge the contribution of, and express solidarity with, the fire and rescue services and the firefighters who put their own safety and lives at risk on that most dreadful day.

In the little time I have, I want to make a couple of quick points about the inquiry that I hope are salient. Like others, I believe the inquiry has been conducted back to front. It might have been more valuable if we could have looked at some of the corporate aspects at the same time and the two aspects could have been run in parallel. Individual politicians and Ministers, including senior Ministers, should be held to account for their actions and the consequences of their policy decisions. I was just thinking about other common strands in this Parliament, where Ministers failed to accept responsibility for the consequences of the decisions. We call it culpability, don’t we? We saw it with the Windrush scandal and the then Home Secretary. We also saw it to a large degree with the May train timetable fiasco under the then Transport Secretary, and now we are seeing the tragic consequence of the dreadful loss of life at Grenfell Tower.

We have to hold the Prime Minister to account. People were huffing and puffing about that, but when he was Mayor of London, he was responsible—despite protestations from the fire authority and from London MP s—for the closure of 10 fire stations, the loss of 27 fire engines and 600 firefighters, and the cutting of 10 of the 52 fire safety inspectors. Someone mentioned the role of fire control, which is absolutely critical. He cut fire control by a quarter over that period. So in my opinion, the inquiry’s decision that phase 1 should focus on the night of the fire has given a reprieve to some of the companies, individuals and politicians who should be held to account for their decisions.

3.59 pm

Mr Sam Gyimah (East Surrey) (LD): I pay tribute to the families and people from the Grenfell community who are here to listen to this important debate. Upon reading the report, all of us should have the human reactions of anger, grief and shock at what happened on the fateful day of 14 June 2017. Those who lost their lives could have been our friends, our brothers, our cousins, our parents or our grandparents. They had their futures ahead of them. Birthdays, engagements, exams, graduations—they had a lot to live for. However, we know now that that tragic loss of life could to some extent have been prevented. Regardless of the politics, the families and the community deserve truth and justice, and this first report, in its clarity and bleakness, goes a step in that direction. It does not answer all the families’ questions, but I hope that the next report and the police inquiry will ultimately offer the necessary closure.

I commend the fire officers on the night for dealing with an unimaginable tragedy. Much has been said about the report today, but not much has been said in this House about compassion. One thing that came out of this event was the compassion of the people of London. Indeed, I think the Evening Standard managed to raise £7.4 million to support the families and the community. However, we know that all that is no substitute for the local authority doing its work to ensure that people are permanently housed properly as dignity requires. There is a lot that needs to be done, and there are many actions that the Government need to take, but this should not be about cost. Public safety—not just in Grenfell, but around the country—should be the most important issue in our considerations.

4.1 pm

John Healey (Wentworth and Dearne) (Lab): The interest in this debate and the abbreviated speeches that people have been forced to make underline the fact that this must be only the start of this House’s debates on the results and findings of the phase 1 report that was published today. I thank Sir Martin Moore-Bick and his staff for the huge amount of work that they have done on the first phase of the inquiry, and I thank all those who contributed to the inquiry with oral, written and expert evidence. My hon. Friend the Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) quite rightly said that there is a bigger picture to come with the second phase of the inquiry, but this report is, as he said, digging deep and telling the world what it needs to know.

Most of all, I pay tribute to the Grenfell survivors, the families of the victims, and the community in north Kensington, who have conducted themselves with such dignity during the course of this painful inquiry. I say to them, “You have suffered unimaginable trauma and
loss, but thank you for having the courage to share this and the resolve to turn your grief into the fight for justice and change.” It is with them in mind that I say and the resolve to turn your grief into the fight for justice and change.

The former Prime Minister, the right hon. Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May), was quite right to say that Sir Martin Moore-Bick and his team could not have produced a thoughtful and thorough report like this without the testimony of survivors, and her contribution today was also thorough and thoughtful. She was right to say that the central important finding, which I will come back to if I have time, is that the cladding was non-compliant. She noted that the recommendations of Dame Judith Hackitt’s report were accepted by the Government, but I say to her and the House that that report was 18 months ago and still no legislation has been introduced, let alone implemented. She spoke movingly about what she said was one of the most shocking things: residents of Grenfell telling her how they had raised concerns about the safety of the block but had been ignored. She rightly said that the Government then introduced a social housing Green Paper, but that report was 15 months ago and still we are only promised a White Paper as a follow-up.

My hon. Friend the Member for Kensington (Emma Dent Coad) again demonstrated her relentless quest for justice and to speak, on behalf of her constituents, the hardest truths to those in power. My hon. Friend the Member for Easington (Grahame Morris) was right to point that the Secretary of State himself conceded on a podcast last week.

The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) rightly said that he was appalled by the leaking of the report, as were we. It was embargoed so that the survivors had time to read it in full, rather than see bits of the report, as were we. It was embargoed so that the survivors had time to read it in full, rather than see bits in the media. He was right that it is a job for Her Majesty’s inspectorate of constabulary and fire and rescue services to ensure that the required action follows.

The Chair of the Housing, Communities and Local Government Committee, my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield South East (Mr Betts), said that the report rightly says that there are serious concerns about the serious delays in getting dangerous cladding off the side of buildings. There is a big question for the Government, because cladding that is now banned on new blocks is in place on thousands of existing blocks. My hon. Friend the Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) rightly spoke about constituents of hers feeling alone in fighting private block owners to get them to remove and replace Grenfell-style cladding. When eight in 10 blocks with Grenfell-style cladding still have it in place nearly two and a half years on, it demands more from the Government. The Prime Minister said that nearly all buildings have work in hand. He is quite simply wrong. Sixty-nine block owners do not even have a plan in place to remove this cladding.

Grenfell Tower was unprecedented but not unavoidable. The hon. and learned Member for Edinburgh South (Joanna Cherry) and my hon. Friend the Member for Croydon North (Mr Reed) both talked about the Lakanal House fire and the coroner’s report in 2013. Points picked up in the recommendations of the Grenfell inquiry report were there a full four years earlier in that coroner’s report to Ministers after the Lakanal House fire: to publish national guidance on the “stay put” principle and its interaction with the “get out and stay out” policy; to require high-rise residential building owners to provide design and safety details for the fire services in information boxes or plates on premises; and to encourage retrofitting of sprinkler systems in high-rise residential blocks.

So it was after Lakanal; so it has been after Grenfell. Action from the Government has simply been too slow and too weak on all fronts. Since the fire, Grenfell survivors have seen three Secretaries of State and four Housing Ministers, all serious and sincere as individuals about the lessons of Grenfell but all fettered by the fundamental basic failure of policy, based on an ideology that is simply too reluctant to take on the vested interests that profit from a lax system of building regulation, too unwilling to have the state act when private interests will not do what is in the public interest and too reluctant to legislate or regulate to require higher and safer standards.

When they were at that Speaker’s House reception marking the two-year anniversary, to which many Members have referred, the victims and the survivors told us, “We should not be here. We should be at home rebuilding our lives. In two years, little has changed and justice still seems so far off.” A national disaster on the scale of Grenfell Tower requires a national response on the same scale from the Government and this has not happened. They have failed to right the wrongs of Grenfell, and it will fall to the next Labour Government to do so.
4.10 pm

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): I am grateful to right hon. and hon. Members from across the House for the contributions they have made today to what I think all would agree has been a deeply moving and important debate. Like the right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne (John Healey), many were not able to speak at the length they would have wished today. I hope that, whatever the outcome of the forthcoming election, the next Parliament will hold a fuller debate at the earliest opportunity.

The Grenfell Tower fire was, as we have heard, an unimaginable tragedy. Today’s publication of the phase 1 report from the inquiry is an important moment, for the bereaved, for survivors, for the community in North Kensington and for the whole country. I know—and we have heard this expressed many times this afternoon—that no report can truly capture the heartache, sorrow, anger and grief that many people rightly feel. Having met survivors and the bereaved, some of whom are here today, I, like others who have spoken, have been truly humbled by their dignity and resolve. The greatest respect we can show them is to guide the path to the answers they seek and to the accountability and justice they are fighting for. There is no possibility where it is due; and to take action of a scale and at a pace that is commensurate with the tragedy that prompted it.

Across the House, there was thanks to Sir Martin Moore-Bick and the inquiry team for a report of great depth and seriousness, and of candour and clarity, including on issues of crucial concern, exemplified by his statement that the tower did not meet building regulations. He could have reserved that statement for the next phase of his report, but he and the inquiry chose to make it now. I hope that statement gives reassurance that the second phase of his report, which, as a number of hon. Members have said, sets these events into a much broader context, is likely to be equally candid and clear. As the Prime Minister said in his opening remarks, the Government will accept all of the findings of the report, and accept them in full. We want to ensure that the recommendations are implemented without delay. We will work with our partners, including fire and rescue services across the country, to deliver them. In answer to the hon. Member for Lincoln (Karen Lee) and the Leader of the Opposition, let me say that of course we will fund any actions that are required in order to do so. We will bring forward legislation as soon as possible, including ahead of the building safety Bill, if that would mean that any of Sir Martin’s recommendations can be implemented sooner than they would otherwise be.

Like the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and many other Members including, to single out just two, the hon. Member for Poplar and Limehouse (Jim Fitzpatrick) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), who are both ex-firefighters, I pay tribute to the incredible bravery of those who responded to the scene. They ran into danger with one ambition alone, which was to save lives, and they deserve our gratitude and respect.

Sir Martin has raised a number of concerns, including about preparation and planning, training, the basic information that was missing, serious deficiencies in communications and control, and problems dealing with 999 calls. Lessons must be learned. My right hon. Friend the Home Secretary will take up the matter immediately.

Most grievous of all was the failure to evacuate the tower once the fire was out of control—the failure to override the “stay put” advice. I want to be clear, as this has been raised a number of times this afternoon: Sir Martin makes it clear in his report that effective compartmentation is likely to remain at the heart of fire safety strategy and will probably continue to provide a safe basis for responding to the vast majority of fires in high-rise buildings. It will be necessary, though, as a number of Members have said, for building owners and fire and rescue services to provide a greater range of responses, including full or partial evacuation; for firefighters and those leading them to be prepared and trained for an alternative, should it be required; and for that training and guidance to be provided, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead (Mrs May) said, so that they can exercise their discretion in that most difficult and challenging of moments. With the National Fire Chiefs Council and others, we will review the “stay put” advice, to ensure that lessons are finally learned.

Mr Betts: One thing that probably has not been mentioned so far is that yes, there need to be adequate responses from firefighters, but fire brigades and authorities also need to hold information about precisely what materials are on the buildings in which they are going to fight the fire.

Robert Jenrick: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right and, as it is one of Sir Martin’s recommendations, that will be one of the items we will take forward and legislate for at the earliest possibility.

Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): We have talked about the responsibility of, and changes needed in, the fire service, but does the Secretary of State agree that the people who caused the problem were the people who put on the cladding and did not deal with that properly? They are the people at fault here.

Robert Jenrick: As the Prime Minister and I have made clear, and as Sir Martin has made clear in his report, we have the greatest admiration for firefighters. The next phase of the report will answer the question of how the cladding, which was not compliant with building regulations, ended up on the building and was such a primary cause of the tragedy.

In the few minutes remaining, let me answer as many of the questions raised as I can. The important questions in respect of sprinklers, signage and fire doors must now be taken forward. We have already announced—in fact, it was one of my first decisions as Secretary of State—that we will consult on reducing the building height at which sprinklers are required. It is not the case that retrofitting sprinklers is necessarily the right course of action for all buildings. Dame Judith Hackitt said in her review that it was not always the answer. What was required was a serious, independent, individual fire safety assessment of every at-risk building, and for the evidence to lead to actions.

I urge developers and building owners to consider Sir Martin’s report and Dame Judith’s report and act on their recommendations now. We do not need to wait until legislation is in place, although people should be under no doubt that we will take it forward regardless. Building owners must take action.
John Healey: Or else?

Kevin Hollinrake: Will the Secretary of State give way?

Robert Jenrick: I am afraid I cannot give way; I have only a couple of moments left.

The right hon. Member for Wentworth and Dearne says, “Or else?” We have said—the Prime Minister reiterated this today—that those building owners who do not take action should face the full force of the law. Local authorities should use the enforcement powers they have, and my Department stands ready to support any local authority that wishes to do that. We will name those building owners that are not remediating ACM cladding at the pace that is required and take enforcement action against them. It is, as I have said previously, frankly shameful that £600 million of taxpayers’ money is now at their disposal to remove this dangerous cladding and yet some are prevaricating. We must and we will take action.

In the broader context, which we will learn about in the next phase, I want to see Dame Judith Hackitt’s independent review implemented in full. It will be through our building safety legislation that was announced in the Queen’s Speech. Building owners must now assess the safety of their buildings and take action if that is required.

A number of hon. Members raised the rehousing of the victims and survivors of the Grenfell tragedy. I can report that 95% of the 201 households who lost their homes have been permanently rehoused. Today, nine households remain to be permanently rehoused. It would be wrong of me to set out their cases before the House, but I know each of their individual circumstances and my Department and I will continue to scrutinise and to challenge the Royal Borough of Kensington and Chelsea to ensure that action is taken and that these individuals, when it is right for them, move into permanent housing of their choosing.

In the remaining seconds available to me, let me say in answer to my right hon. Friend the Member for Maidenhead that we will be taking forward the social housing White Paper. That is an important step in providing security and dignity to individuals who feel that they have not been listened to and that their views are not respected. We are working with Grenfell United, which represents some of the victims of the Grenfell tragedy, to ensure that that is done right and that we make the changes that are required for future generations.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the report from the Grenfell Tower Inquiry.

NORTHERN IRELAND BUDGET BILL:
BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That the following provisions shall apply to the proceedings on the Northern Ireland Budget Bill:

Timetable

(1) (a) Proceedings on Second Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) one and a half hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

(b) Proceedings in Committee of the whole House, any proceedings on Consideration and proceedings up to and including Third Reading shall be brought to a conclusion (so far as not previously concluded) three hours after the commencement of proceedings on the Motion for this Order.

Timing of proceedings and Questions to be put

(2) When the Bill has been read a second time:

(a) it shall, despite Standing Order No. 63 (Committal of bills not subject to a programme order), stand committed to a Committee of the whole House without any Question being put;

(b) the Speaker shall leave the Chair whether or not notice of an Instruction has been given.

(3) (a) On the conclusion of proceedings in Committee of the whole House, the Chairman shall report the Bill to the House without putting any Question.

(b) If the Bill is reported with amendments, the House shall proceed to consider the Bill as amended without any Question being put.

(4) If, following proceedings in Committee of the whole House and any proceedings on Consideration of the Bill, a legislative grand committee withholds consent to the Bill or any Clause or Schedule of the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill, the House shall proceed to Reconsideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

(5) If, following Reconsideration of the Bill:

(a) a legislative grand committee withholds consent to any Clause or Schedule of the Bill or any amendment made to the Bill (but does not withhold consent to the whole Bill and, accordingly, the Bill is amended in accordance with Standing Order No.83N(6)), and

(b) a Minister of the Crown indicates his or her intention to move a minor or technical amendment to the Bill, the House shall proceed to consequential Consideration of the Bill without any Question being put.

(6) For the purpose of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (1), the Chairman or Speaker shall forthwith put the following Questions in the same order as they would fall to be put if this Order did not apply:

(a) any Question already proposed from the Chair;

(b) any Question necessary to bring to a decision a Question so proposed;

(c) the Question on any amendment moved or Motion made by a Minister of the Crown;

(d) any other Question necessary for the disposal of the business to be concluded; and shall not put any other questions, other than the question on any motion described in paragraph (17)(a) of this Order.

(7) On a Motion so made for a new Clause or a new Schedule, the Chairman or Speaker shall put only the Question that the Clause or Schedule be added to the Bill.

(8) if two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (6)(c) on successive amendments moved or Motions made by a Minister of the Crown, the Chairman or Speaker shall instead put a single Question in relation to those amendments or Motions.

(9) If two or more Questions would fall to be put under paragraph (6)(d) in relation to successive provisions of the Bill, the Chairman shall instead put a single Question in relation to those provisions, except that the Question shall be put separately on any Clause of or Schedule to the Bill which a Minister of the Crown has signified an intention to leave out. Consideration of Lords Amendments

(10) (a) Any Lords Amendments to the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.
(b) Proceedings on consideration of Lords Amendments shall (so far as not previously concluded) be brought to a conclusion one hour after their commencement; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(11) Paragraphs (2) to (11) of Standing Order No. 83F (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on consideration of Lords amendments) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (10) of this Order.

Subsequent stages

(12) (a) Any further Message from the Lords on the Bill may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(b) 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; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (a) shall thereupon be resumed.

(13) Paragraphs (2) to (9) of Standing Order No. 83G (Programme orders: conclusion of proceedings on further messages from the Lords) apply for the purposes of bringing any proceedings to a conclusion in accordance with paragraph (12) of this Order.

Reasons Committee

(14) Paragraphs (2) to (6) of Standing Order No. 83H (Programme orders: reasons committee) apply in relation to any committee to be appointed to draw up reasons after proceedings have been brought to a conclusion in accordance with this Order.

Miscellaneous

(15) Standing Order No. 15(1)(Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on the Bill.

(16) Standing Order No. 82 (Business Committee) shall not apply in relation to any proceedings to which this Order applies.

(17) (a) No Motion shall be made, except by a Minister of the Crown, to alter the order in which any proceedings on the Bill are taken, to recommit the Bill or to vary or supplement the provisions of this Order.

(b) No notice shall be required of such a Motion.

(c) Such a motion may be considered forthwith without any Question being put; and any proceedings interrupted for that purpose shall be suspended accordingly.

(d) The Question on such a Motion shall be put forthwith; and any proceedings suspended under sub-paragraph (c) shall thereupon be resumed.

(e) Standing Order No. 15(1) (Exempted business) shall apply to proceedings on such a Motion.

(18) (a) No dilatory Motion shall be made in relation to proceedings to which this Order applies except by a Minister of the Crown.

(b) The Question on any such Motion shall be put forthwith.

(19) No debate shall be held in accordance with Standing Order No. 24 (Emergency debates) at today's sitting after this Order has been agreed.

(20) Proceedings to which this Order applies shall not be interrupted under any Standing Order relating to the sittings of the House.

(21) No private business may be considered at today's sitting after this Order has been agreed.—(Julian Smith.)

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Under the terms of the Business of the House motion that the House has just passed, amendments for the Committee stage of the Bill may now be accepted by the Clerks at the Table only. Members may continue to table amendments up until the start of proceedings in Committee of the Whole House. For the benefit of everyone, however, I would encourage Members to table their amendments as soon as possible. The Chairman of Ways and Means will take a provisional decision on selection and grouping on the basis of amendments tabled a quarter of an hour after the beginning of the Second Reading debate, and that provisional selection list will be made available in the Vote Office and on the parliamentary website before the start of proceedings in Committee. If necessary, an updated amendment paper will be made available as soon as possible during proceedings in Committee.
Northern Ireland Budget Bill

Second Reading

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I invite the Secretary of State to move the Second Reading, I must announce the Speaker’s decision on certification for the purposes of Standing Order No. 83J (Certification of bills etc. as relating exclusively to England or England and Wales and being within devolved legislative competence). On the basis of material put before the Speaker, the Speaker certified that in his opinion the Bill does not meet the criteria required for certification under that Standing Order.

4.23 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Julian Smith): I beg to move, That the Bill be now read a Second time.

As the House well knows, Northern Ireland has now been without a functioning Executive for almost three years. Since May, the Northern Ireland parties have engaged in a series of cross-party talks focused on getting Stormont back up and running. It remains my assessment that the issues preventing the restoration of Stormont are few in number and soluble in substance, and I stand ready to facilitate further talks if and when political parties are willing to move forward. However, until such time as they are able to reach an agreement, the UK Government and this Parliament have a duty to ensure good and functional governance in Northern Ireland. We have a duty to ensure that public services can continue to be provided for all citizens of Northern Ireland. This Bill upholds that duty by placing the budget published in February 2019 by my predecessor on to a legal footing and enabling the Northern Ireland civil service to access the full funding for this financial year.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I am grateful to the Secretary of State for allowing me to intervene so early in his speech, on the issues of public finance and the ability of our services to respond appropriately. I do so because I am mindful of the comments you have made, Madam Deputy Speaker, about the ability to table amendments. The Secretary of State knows that I have a keen interest in pursuing a legislative fix that would allow our Co-Ownership housing association in Northern Ireland to be able to avail financial transactions capital. The organisation would then be redefined so that it would not burden the public finances. Billions of pounds in housing association loans would not be on the public balance sheet. What commitments and assurances can the Secretary of State give that would assuage me from my desire to amend this Bill?

Julian Smith: The hon. Gentleman has been precipitous in his intervention, as he often is. I will address that point shortly.

Since January 2017, Parliament has legislated four times to secure the public finances of Northern Ireland. These were not interventions that the UK Government wanted to make, but they were necessary to ensure the continued provision of public services in the absence of an Executive.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I am extremely grateful to the Secretary of State for giving way again. I had a stab at making this point earlier today during Northern Ireland questions, and I wonder whether he will indulge me just one more time.

I assume that the part of the budget that is covered by schedule 1, relating to the Department for Communities, covers welfare mitigation payments in Northern Ireland up until March 2020. In the September 2019 joint report of the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs and the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, entitled “Welfare policy in Northern Ireland”, the Committees point out that ending the mitigation payments after March 2020 could make some 35,000 households in Northern Ireland worse off by hundreds of pounds a month. Is the Secretary of State aware of that?

The Department for Communities cannot extend these payments because, in the absence of the Assembly, that requires ministerial action. This is urgent because the Department is saying that it will need to start advising claimants by this autumn of significant cuts to their welfare payments next year, unless the Government act.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Order.

Steve McCabe: May I have just one second more? I am very grateful, Madam Deputy Speaker. I am sure the Secretary of State does not want an unintended consequence in Northern Ireland, so will he look at this issue and act now?

Julian Smith: The hon. Gentleman tackled me on this issue in the Tea Room earlier. I will refer to it, and my right hon. Friend the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, will also refer to it in Committee. We are aware of this welfare challenge. It is indeed a responsibility of the Northern Ireland civil service; civil servants do have a power that they can use with regard to the discretionary housing payments. However, I assure the hon. Gentleman that I will spend time on this issue over the coming days and weeks, because it is an important one.

Frank Field (Birkenhead) (Ind): This is an immensely important issue for some of the very poorest people in Northern Ireland. Might the Secretary of State go back to the Department and ask his permanent secretary what powers he can draw the Secretary of State’s attention to that will allow him, before the week is out, to take action to prevent people from falling off the cliff into greater poverty?

Julian Smith: I am in the process of working through how we can move forward with this. It is a devolved matter, but I will be speaking to the Northern Ireland civil service over the coming days and weeks. As has been alluded to, these are funds and mitigations that help the most vulnerable citizens in Northern Ireland. I take these matters seriously, and I will come back to the hon. Gentleman and the right hon. Gentleman in due course.

Frank Field: Given that we do not have devolved government in Northern Ireland, surely there are powers somewhere that will allow the Secretary of State to act while we are waiting for ever and a day for devolved government.

Julian Smith: Indeed, the Northern Ireland civil service has a power, but if I can leave it there, I will come back to this House and come back to the hon. Gentlemen about this matter.
Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does the Secretary of State accept, however, that even with the powers that civil servants have, the cost of these mitigation measures is such that budgets will have to be rejigged—quite substantially rejigged—and that that can be done only if a Minister makes a decision? Is this not yet another example of the Secretary of State burying his head in the sand and pretending that the Executive will come back when he knows that they are not going to come back? This can be dealt with only if civil servants bring forward a report saying, “This is the money that is required and this is how we see it being reallocated.” Someone has to make a decision, and it will probably be a Minister here.

Julian Smith: The right hon. Gentleman makes an important point. However, I go back to the fact that it is, I think we all agree, in Northern Ireland’s best interests that the Executive are reformed and the Assembly gets back up and running. Any idea that it is a better solution to take powers here at Westminster is false, and we have to focus on that.

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): I am going to make some progress. I would like to pay tribute to the Northern Ireland civil service. It has the most dedicated civil servants who are continuing to deliver public services in the absence of political leadership and political decision making. Hon. Members from across the House have approached me today raising legitimate concerns about the future of public services. While today’s debate is not the place to tackle these issues—this Bill simply makes the necessary authorisations for expenditure for this year—those Members are right that they need to continue to be monitored carefully, and that is what we will be doing. However, we are up against a lack of a local decision making.

Lady Hermon rose—

Julian Smith: Could I continue to make a little progress?

There are some significant challenges to reflect on, such as housing associations and welfare reform, but there are opportunities, too. The £163 million growth deal announcement to Northern Ireland shows what can be achieved when politicians of all backgrounds, local businesses and community leaders come together to shape the economic future for their local area and for Northern Ireland as a whole. That is why we want to see these issues taken forward by a restored Executive.

To my frustration, however, it is necessary once again for Westminster to intervene to provide the necessary authorisations for expenditure in Northern Ireland in the continuing absence of an Executive and of a functioning Assembly. The finances of Northern Ireland Departments are in a critical state. The legal authority for the Northern Ireland civil service to spend is currently capped at approximately 70% of the opening position of the previous financial year’s budget—a spending cap that was approved by this House in March 2019. The Northern Ireland Audit Office and the public services ombudsman have already reached their cash limits, and the Department of Finance has been forced to issue two Departments with contingency funding. This temporary financial measure can be used on a very short-term basis to manage the smaller Departments running out of cash, but it is just not tenable for a significant number of Departments.

James Brokenshire (Old Bexley and Sidcup) (Con): I know that my right hon. Friend will be taking these steps very reluctantly, as I remember doing when I was in his post. He has highlighted the deals and the investment in various parts of Northern Ireland. I am conscious of investment in the north-west and promoting economic activity and opportunity in that part of Northern Ireland. Can he comment on the plans for a graduate medical school at the Ulster University Magee campus in Derry/Londonderry, which could promote a sense of skill and opportunity and secure the positive outcome that we would like to see for the north-west?

Julian Smith: I thank my right hon. Friend for his intervention. He has worked hard to promote the merits of the Magee campus, as have others. I visited it only...
two weeks ago. I am extremely committed to making that work, as I know he is. I think that we are close to a position where we can move that forward. It is a devolved matter, but there are things we can do, and we will continue to do them.

The Bill upholds our commitment to good governance in Northern Ireland by preventing the Northern Ireland civil service from having to rely on emergency section 59 powers. It is a budget set by the UK Government, but one that the Northern Ireland civil service must plan and implement. If Stormont gets back up and running within the financial year, the new Executive will be able to adjust the budget as they see fit and amend the legislation at the end of the financial year. The Bill does not authorise any new money. In the absence of a functioning Executive and Assembly, it simply authorises spending money that has already been allocated by this Parliament in the UK estimates process, together with locally generated revenue.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): I want to ask the Secretary of State about Barnett consequentials from money that has been ring-fenced for special projects. One example is the high streets fund, to help our town centres in the United Kingdom. We got our Barnett consequentials in Northern Ireland, but that money has been swallowed up by the Departments and used to plug holes in their budgets. We have not been able to ring-fence that money and ensure that money coming from the Exchequer is used for the intended purpose.

Julian Smith: My hon. Friend raises an important point. The Barnett consequentials, whether of the spending review or of other allocations from this place and from Whitehall, are very difficult to attribute due to the lack of an Executive. We are seeing a sort of constipation in the system, as we have cash arriving but no decision making to spend that cash.

I shall now briefly turn to the Bill’s contents, which largely rehearse what the former Secretary of State set out to this House in a written ministerial statement earlier this year. In short, the Bill authorises Northern Ireland Departments and certain other bodies to incur expenditure and use resources for the financial year ending on 31 March 2020.

Clause 1 will authorise the Northern Ireland Department of Finance to issue £5.3 billion out of the consolidated fund of Northern Ireland. The sums of money granted to Northern Ireland Departments and other bodies are set out in schedule 1, which also sets out the purposes for which the funds are to be used. The allocations in this budget reflect where the key pressures lie in Northern Ireland, building on discussions that the UK Government have had with the Northern Ireland civil service, the main parties in Northern Ireland and broader stakeholders, and, where possible, reflecting the previous Executive’s priorities.

Clause 2 will authorise the temporary borrowing by the Northern Ireland Department of Finance of about £6 billion to safeguard against the possibility of a temporary deficiency in the consolidated fund of Northern Ireland. If used, this money would be repaid by 31 March 2020.

Clause 3 will authorise Northern Ireland Departments and other specified public bodies to use resources amounting to about £6 billion in the year ending 31 March 2020 for the purposes specified in schedule 2.

Clause 4 will set limits on the accruing resources, including both operating and non-operating accruing resources, that may be used in the current financial year. The Bill would normally have been taken through the Assembly. Clause 5 therefore includes a series of adaptations that ensure that, once approved by both Houses in Westminster, the Bill will be treated as though it was an Assembly budget Act.

Alongside the Bill, I have laid before the House, as a Command Paper, a set of main estimates for the Departments and bodies covered by this budget Bill. These estimates, which have been prepared by the Northern Ireland Department of Finance, set out the breakdown of resource allocation in greater detail than the schedules to the Bill.

This is a fair and balanced budget that provides a secure basis for protecting and preserving public services, with a real-terms increase in health and education spending and protections for frontline Departments delivering key public services, but the budget is not an easy one. It requires savings and efficiencies to enable Departments to live within their means, and it will fall to the Northern Ireland Departments to plan and prepare to take decisions to do just that. As I hope right hon. and hon. Members will agree, this is very much a minimal step to ensure that public services can continue to be provided in Northern Ireland for the full financial year.

As I conclude, I will set out once again a point that I have made several times before to this House. The UK Government are steadfastly committed to the Belfast agreement. Legislating on Northern Ireland budgetary matters at Westminster is not a step that I or my ministerial colleagues want to take—nor is it one that I would wish to take again. I am determined to restore the political institutions set out in the 1998 agreement and its successors at the earliest possible opportunity. On 14 October, the people of Northern Ireland had gone without a power-sharing devolved Government for 1,000 days. The continued failure to restore the Executive will bring extremely difficult choices about how to ensure effective governance in Northern Ireland.

4.44 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): May I say to the Secretary of State that we well understand why the fast-track process has to be used for this legislation as we approach the general election? Obviously, the needs of the people of Northern Ireland require that there is a budget to provide the vital services on which they depend. It does however make it all the more paradoxical—and, I think, shameful—that the same fast-track process was not available for the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill to make its way through Parliament. I hope that even at this late stage those words are echoed from the Secretary of State, who I know is sympathetic to the case, to the business managers, who have so callously let those people down. It is an embarrassment for him, but it is extremely difficult to justify the decisions of the business managers when everyone in the House would be prepared to make time available for that legislation.

The right hon. Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) is in the Chamber. I remark on that simply because he was the Secretary of State when Stormont collapsed. Since then, we have recycled Secretaries of State and the paralysis in decision making in Northern Ireland continues.
There are some technical issues that we ought to address. One of the questions in any budgetary process ought to be an account of value for money. However, there is almost no capacity for any form of scrutiny of the efficiency of the spend from this budget. That is as unacceptable to hon. Members from Northern Ireland and taxpayers in Northern Ireland as it is to taxpayers anywhere else in the United Kingdom. Value for money is fundamental to any form of Government spending or public spending, and the scrutiny required for that is not available for this budget.

Sammy Wilson: The shadow Secretary of State is making an important point about the inability to scrutinise the efficiency of the spend. Does he also accept that we do not even have a chance to look at the relevancy of the spend? Much of the spending that goes on in Departments is determined by decisions made by an Executive four years ago, and new priorities that are emerging in Northern Ireland do not get a chance to be considered because civil servants cannot initiate new measures.

Tony Lloyd: I have enormous sympathy with the point made by the right hon. Gentleman. One thing we do know is that there has been significant demographic change in Northern Ireland in the last three years. The population is growing increasingly elderly and the number of young people, in relative terms, is decreasing. Therefore, the decisions made by politicians those years back may still be relevant in some areas, but in others they are beginning to be stretched.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that there is currently not only a lack of scrutiny and reactivity, as outlined, but a lack of transparency? I have written to the head of the civil service on numerous occasions to ask about the additional money that goes into the Northern Ireland budget—I accept that it is by way of unhyphenated Barnett consequentials, which is not ring-fenced, and decisions must be made on where it goes—and I get a fairly stock response simply to say, “This is not ring-fenced. We will have discussions and civil servants will decide.” Civil servants have done nothing to open up their processes to scrutiny and transparency. It appears that they are still unaccountable to anybody. We now see this Bill, which outlines their decisions, rushed through this House with very limited scrutiny. It is letting down the people of Northern Ireland.

Tony Lloyd: Again, I have real sympathy with the point made by the hon. Lady. It is similar to the point made earlier by the hon. Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan) about ring-fencing of moneys for the high streets and the inability to trace those moneys. In fact, some time back I raised with the previous Secretary of State whether it would be possible to have an accountability mechanism whereby the Northern Ireland civil service would respond to questions from Members of this House so we could scrutinise its decisions for exactly those reasons and provide at least transparency, even if that would not necessarily lead to proper accountability of the spend made.

These are really important issues, and they would be important even in an annual budget. If this was the budget for a large local authority—the Greater Manchester Combined Authority budget or that of the London Mayor—are, I suppose, equivalent to the budget of Northern Ireland—we would be astonished if we did not have the capacity to scrutinise it. I say to the Secretary of State that I think the time is coming when we will need to look again at how the scrutiny process takes place; that will not be resolved today, but clearly we have to look at it.

I have some questions for the Secretary of State. I should say that we do not intend to block the Bill in any way, shape or form. It is vital that it goes through, and the amount of time available does not allow for any rarefied debate about more than the general outlines. However, there are some issues that we must begin to address. I nearly quoted the permanent secretary at the Department of Health, but I shall paraphrase: he said that Northern Ireland has the money for a world-class health service, but it just does not have the money for the health service that Northern Ireland has. In that, he was referring to the fact that the Bengoa reforms, which would have transformed the health service in Northern Ireland, had not been implemented.

There are issues about areas where we know the spend is no longer adequate. We know, for example, that Northern Ireland now has longer waiting lists than any other part of this United Kingdom. We know that mental health provision is unacceptably poor in Northern Ireland; I have to say that it is poor in my own constituency, but it is nevertheless particularly bad in Northern Ireland. The chilling fact that more people have committed suicide since the end of the troubles than people died during the troubles gives some indication of the need for improvement in those services.

We know about social care and the demands on it—again, this addresses the point made by the right hon. Member for East Antrim. We know that the number of elderly people and the dependent elderly is growing all the time in Northern Ireland, just as it is in my own constituency, but the capacity of the budget to deal with those issues has remained largely unchanged. We know that education spending is no longer appropriate: Northern Ireland still has a high standard of results in other part of this United Kingdom. We know that education spending is no longer adequate. We know, for example, that Northern Ireland now has longer waiting lists than any other part of this United Kingdom. We know that mental health provision is unacceptably poor in Northern Ireland; I have to say that it is poor in my own constituency, but it is nevertheless particularly bad in Northern Ireland. The chilling fact that more people have committed suicide since the end of the troubles than people died during the troubles gives some indication of the need for improvement in those services.

I would particularly like to continue the questions raised by my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Catherine McKinnell), which my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol South (Karin Smyth) raised in Question Time earlier. The Minister of State has used words like “the same refrain” when saying that the answer lies in getting devolved governance back. I understand that that is the long-term answer, but we are going to face a crisis for some individual families because of the exhaustion of the welfare mitigations. It is not simply about housing: it cuts across other areas of spend where those mitigations are protecting families now. The Secretary of State’s response was that he would look to see what could be done by him and the Northern Ireland Office. We have to look very closely at the Secretary of State and Northern Ireland Office working with the Northern Ireland civil service, and that is important.
Let me ask a specific question. Does this budget contain money for the Stormont House bodies? Those bodies ought to be set up imminently, of course, so money has to be made available for them. We need to know that the proper provisions are there. Equivalently, and this is also important, if the historical institutional abuse Bill is not going to come before Parliament immediately, I hope it will be introduced rapidly by whatever Government take their place after the election so that that legislation can come into operation. That means we need to see within this budgetary framework, resource available for HIA victims, who deserve not simply our compassion but our recognition and our financial support.

I need in that context to ask the following question. The Secretary of State has been very specific: he has undertaken to see whether it is possible in terms of welfare spend to use imagination around the powers that do exist. I wonder whether he will now begin to apply the same kind of imagination to see whether it is possible to create within the framework of the existing spending operations something that begins the process of reconciliation, even if it is just the simple acknowledgment of payment to victims of institutional abuse. Money clearly is not everything in that context, but if it is possible, even without the legislative framework, to find an imaginative way of making some form of payment, that would at least go some way to showing the willingness of the Government and the Secretary of State, which I know is there, to try to rectify the failure of the system and get this Bill through Parliament.

This Bill is important—I think everybody accepts that. Nobody is going to want to block the capacity for the structures to operate within Northern Ireland over the coming three months, so it is important that this is passed today before Parliament is dissolved. We will support the Secretary of State in moving it through Parliament, but there are some issues that he and his Department need to begin to look at and see whether there are at least some patches that can be applied that can make a material difference to those who would most suffer if we do not get the answers right.

4.56 pm

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): That was a quicker speech than we thought it would be.

May I begin by briefly putting on the record that I think the House should have enormous appreciation for the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound)? During my time in this place since 2015 he has been the steadfast rock with regard to Northern Ireland. I occasionally see him as the political equivalent of the Giant’s Causeway—nobody quite knows why he is there or why he is that shape, but we know that things would not quite be the same if he was not there. The House will miss him, and his interest in and knowledge of the affairs of Northern Ireland and the politics of the island of Ireland will be missed. [Interruption.] Yes, he is going to be a tourist attraction in his own right—and is already listed, I believe, as an ancient monument.

Our thanks should also go to the Minister of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd). The idea of the Northern Ireland Office not having a Hurd somewhere near it is depressing and dispiriting, and I wish my right hon. Friend well. Although she is not in her place, as Chairman of the Select Committee I ought to repeat what I said in Committee this morning and express my eternal thanks to the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey), who has done so much on behalf of the communities of Northern Ireland over so many years.

I obviously support this budget. I echo entirely what the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) said, and I also echo the concerns of the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) with regard to the welfare cliff that we cantor towards in a slightly unguided, uncontrollable way.

I will not read it out, but page 5 of the explanatory notes to the Bill sets out clearly why fast-tracking is necessary. We appreciate the reasons why, and we can rehearse and rehearse and rehearse in a rather odd political version of the film “Groundhog Day” the comments, “I wish Stormont was back up and running...Ministers are doing all they can to achieve that...Parties stand ready to come back”, yet we never quite get that over the line.

While we fiddle with that issue, everybody is aware of the problems in Northern Ireland with regard to welfare, the downturn in education and the acute issues with healthcare. If we are serious, and if talking about Northern Ireland as a part of the Union is something beyond words and some sort of abstract, we should worry that we have allowed the eccentric to become the norm and allowed a mindset to develop whereby emergency legislation, sticking plasters and ad hoc solutions have to be found. If this was taking place in Scotland, Wales, North Dorset or any of the counties of England, we would be up in arms. Front-page articles would be written about it and questions would be asked all over the place. The fact that they are not is a cause for concern. How can we ever hope to make the politics of Northern Ireland and public service to its taxpayers as normal and as mainstream in Ballymena as one might find in Blandford Forum in my constituency? We are never going to make the progress on peace, reconciliation and confidence building that is so desperately required.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): I agree with what the hon. Gentleman says. He mentioned welfare a few moments ago. That is of particular concern to many people in Northern Ireland, particularly with regard to welfare mitigation payments, which were negotiated by a member of my party when he was Minister. They give rise to great concern, because in four short months, those mitigation measures will fall away. We need to take steps immediately and urgently to deal with that problem.

Simon Hoare: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right. People in communities in Northern Ireland today will be worrying about the impacts of the end of the mitigations. They will be among the most vulnerable in the community, who have the least opportunity to ride even a temporary blip or gap in service provision, and they will be the hardest hit. We understand that we are adding to their justifiable reasons for concern and anxiety, because as well as Stormont not sitting, Westminster will not be sitting either. The ability of right hon. and hon. Members to hold the Secretary of State and his ministerial team to account on the Floor of the House, in a Select Committee or in Westminster Hall will be removed from us. A democratic deficit—an accountability vacuum—will be created for five or six weeks, and that presupposes...
that on 12 December, there is a clear-cut result that effectively allows something to resume on Monday 16 December.

We do not know what the result will be; we could be in for weeks of horse trading, with the usually happy time of Christmas and the new year elongating the window when no decisions are taken into early in the new year. Those who can least afford any hardship are likely to be facing it, and having their burden of woe added to, without having any democratic forum in which their concerns can be expressed and the decisions—or lack of decisions—taken by Ministers can be questioned and challenged. That is the icing on the cake of the democratic deficit that is now becoming the norm, and of the tendency to deal with Northern Ireland as a perpetual emergency, which is subliminally, if you will, undermining the path of peace and civil stability that we all wish to see. We have to be careful: we are allowing this psychologically to become the norm.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): Will my hon. Friend give way?

Simon Hoare: Of course, I give way to my hon. and gallant Friend.

Bob Stewart: I do not feel very gallant.

I seem to recall that two Secretaries of State ago I sat in this House and heard that direct rule would have to be imposed very soon, and here we are, 18 months later, still not there. The people of Northern Ireland must be really fed up with the fact that we cannot give them what you will—is not sustainable. These are citizens we provide grist to the mill of those, including some in the nationalist community, who like to castigate the British Government and say, “This is just the big imperial mother Parliament flexing her muscles and exerting herself”. So it is not, I am afraid, as easy as just deploying direct rule, as desirable as that would be for service output.

My hon. Friend is right, however, that at some point somebody will have to take a decision, and how we mitigate things would then depend on that decision, because this perpetual coma, limbo, purgatory—call it what you will—is not sustainable. These are citizens we should consider equal to ourselves on the mainland. This disruption in the delivery of governance, which we would not support or sustain for more than three weeks were it an English county division, cannot be allowed to become the norm any more. At some point, somebody will have to be brave and take a decision, knowing full well that we can please some of the people some of the time, but not all of the people all of the time.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): While we welcome the Bill, in so far as it is necessary, we most certainly do not welcome the circumstances in which Parliament has to legislate. I listened to the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), and he made some very important points. It is ironic that Members of Parliament elected to this House from constituencies in Northern Ireland who refuse to take their seats, and therefore do not involve themselves in the process, are the very people responsible for the fact that we are dealing with this legislation today and that we have limited ability to scrutinise it. There is only one party in Northern Ireland refusing to form a Government, and that party is Sinn Féin.

Mr Gregory Campbell: My right hon. Friend is drawing attention to a matter that has been raised numerous times. Does he agree that, to add insult to injury, what does not get mentioned very often, in the House or outside, is the fact that the House pays those Members not to attend and represent their constituents and gives them expenses for office costs, flights and hotel bills?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I appreciate that intervention. I know that from time to time Members express concerns about the pay of Members of the Legislative Assembly. I rarely hear a concern expressed about the paid lobbyists of Sinn Féin who are omnipresent in the coffee shops or outside on the Green but are absent from these green Benches, failing to fulfil their responsibilities to their constituents. Yet they alone are responsible for Northern Ireland’s not having a functioning Executive.

On 21 October—this month—the Assembly met, and representatives of a number of parties turned up. Shamefully, representatives of Sinn Féin were not among them. They absented themselves, and I have to say with some regret that the Alliance party also absented itself. This is the party that describes itself as the bridge builder, the party to bring people together, but on an occasion when we were bringing our elected representatives together at Stormont to try to break the logjam, the bridge builders were nowhere to be seen. They were absent without leave.

I hear lectures from some Alliance party representatives about how we should be doing this and that and restoring Stormont, but when they had an opportunity to show their presence and highlight the fact that Sinn Féin alone is holding the people of Northern Ireland to ransom, yet again the Alliance party gave Sinn Féin political cover by absenting itself from Stormont.

Emma Little Pengelly: Does my right hon. Friend agree that this is an issue about which many people in all communities in Northern Ireland care very deeply? People are very concerned, because they do not know about the details that have led the Secretary of State to present regulations relating to the termination of pregnancies. Those who did not turn up, or who refused to go into that Chamber, did not just deny any democratic accountability in respect of that decision; they even closed down base debate because they disagreed with another party’s stance, and some other people’s stance, on the issue. That is shameful. They should have at least facilitated debate, because the people of Northern Ireland wanted that.
Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. I have said this before, but I will keep putting it on the record because it needs to be said, lest the perception be given that somehow there is a problem that goes beyond Sinn Féin. Yes, there are difficulties in Northern Ireland that need to be resolved. Yes, there are issues that need to be addressed. But the people of Northern Ireland elected their Members of the Legislative Assembly to go to Stormont and sort those issues out. The place in which to do that is the forum that was created under the Belfast agreement for the very purpose of resolving our difficulties.

For our part, the Democratic Unionist party wants to see Stormont functioning properly. If the Secretary of State, or the Speaker, or whoever, wants to convene the Assembly on any day, we will be there. We will appoint our Ministers, we will elect an Executive, we will play our full part. But our Assembly Members are being penalised, and I have to say, with the greatest respect to the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), that there is not a single Democratic Unionist MLA in Northern Ireland who does not want to be doing their full work at Stormont. In fact, we are losing good people because they cannot do their job.

I have a concern—others may not, but I do—about what this means for the political class in Northern Ireland. If we are dissuading people from becoming involved in politics, that is not good for the future of Northern Ireland, and it is not good for the development of the political process. I understand the sentiment that leads people to say, “Cut their pay”, but I think it a little unfair for all the Assembly Members to be punished because one political party refuses to do its duty and play its part in that political process, and is holding the rest of us to ransom.

Sammy Wilson: Does my right hon. Friend not find it ironic that when Sinn Féin raises those funds in America and other parts of the world, they can be used for the purposes of promoting the party in the United Kingdom but not in the Republic of Ireland? That is because the Government of the Republic of Ireland have had more guts in dealing with Sinn Féin than this Government here at Westminster have had.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: It goes further than that. In response to the point made by the hon. Member for Beckenham, I believe that we have not had direct rule reintroduced because Sinn Féin objects to it. On the one hand, it will not allow us to function as an Assembly and an Executive; on the other hand, it says that we cannot have direct rule. There is surely an irony there. The party that calls itself republican and objects to so-called British rule in Ireland is the party responsible for this Parliament having to exercise its authority to agree budgets and take legislative decisions. That is entirely down to Sinn Féin. It speaks out of both sides of its mouth. On the one hand, it is the ultimate republican party demanding an end to the British presence. Incidentally, that includes myself and all my right hon. and hon. Friends. It does not want us to be British. It does not want our British identity to be exercised, despite the fact that it has signed up to agreements that supposedly respect that. It does not respect this Parliament. Just this morning I heard Sinn Féin say that one of the slogans for this election will be to ditch Westminster. So, we have ditched the Assembly, and we have ditched the Executive—let’s ditch Westminster! What are we going to be left with to provide government within Northern Ireland? This is a ridiculous situation and it cannot go on.

I say to the Minister and to the Secretary of State that in the next Parliament we cannot continue with this situation with the absolute minimum of decisions being taken to pass budgets, when we do not have proper scrutiny of government in Northern Ireland. It is not right, and my colleagues have made that clear. I shall give one little example, and it relates to the education budget in Northern Ireland. I think there would be cross-party support for more funding going into special educational needs in Northern Ireland, yet we are frustrated in being able to influence those kinds of decisions, because we do not have an Assembly. There are parents in my constituency—and, I am sure, in those of all other right hon. and hon. Members from Northern Ireland—who are desperate to have adequate educational support for their children, but we cannot change the way in which the budget is spent because we do not have proper opportunity for scrutiny. That is just wrong, and it cannot continue.

I am proud of what the Democratic Unionist party has delivered in this Parliament for Northern Ireland: additional funding for public services, reform of our health service, and more money for our schools and for
infrastructure projects. All those things are important, but it is extremely frustrating that we are not always able to influence how that additional funding is spent. That is difficult to explain to my constituents, because they expect their Member of Parliament to be able to influence those things. We are neither one thing nor the other. We do not have direct rule from Westminster, and we do not have devolution in Northern Ireland. We are in this kind of—

Bob Stewart: Limbo.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: Limbo; the hon. Member for North Dorset described it as another thing earlier. I cannot accept that for my constituents. This is not British democracy functioning for the people of Northern Ireland. I have every sympathy with the Secretary of State, and I commend his and his team’s efforts to bring the parties together to try to get an accommodation and to try to restore devolved government. We do not believe that the fault for that lies at the foot of the Secretary of State; it lies at the door of Connolly House in west Belfast, the headquarters of Sinn Féin, which is responsible for us having no Government.

I will briefly touch on two particular aspects of the budget, both of which speak to public safety in Northern Ireland. The first is the Police Service of Northern Ireland. One of the successes in recent years has been the progress in the level of public support for policing in Northern Ireland and the transformation of the police service. However, having met the Chief Constable recently, I am worried about police numbers. I know that the Government have said that they are recruiting more police officers—it is a big part of their platform for the general election—and I know that the PSNI is engaged in some recruitment, but the demographics and the turnover of experienced police officers are not being matched by recruitment. We will want to sit down with the Government after the general election to look at that, because there is a need to increase the number of officers available for community policing, which is crucial for the continuation of public confidence in policing in Northern Ireland.

Mr Gregory Campbell: The Police Federation for Northern Ireland gave evidence at the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee this morning, and I asked a series of questions about the required number of police personnel. Does my right hon. Friend agree that, looking at policing both in the past and at present, we appear to need in excess of 1,000 additional personnel?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: My hon. Friend is absolutely right. That is what the Police Federation for Northern Ireland and the Chief Constable have been saying, so we need to consider police officers and the recruitment process.

My final point on public safety relates to the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service, which is headquartered at Lisburn in my constituency and comes under the remit of the Department of Health. Of course, the Department has enormous pressures on its budget and on how it manages staff, so I have every sympathy, and the priority in the Department must be the health service and health service reform. However, I am nevertheless concerned about the downwards trend in funding for the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service. In 2019-20, the budget for the fire and rescue service is £74.1 million, but it was £81.6 million in 2011-12, so there has been a significant cut.

Earlier today, we had a debate on the report on the tragic circumstances of the fire at Grenfell Tower. None of us wants to see that kind of situation, but the cuts in the Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service leave me concerned, as a public representative, about its capacity to respond to that kind of emergency situation. I will not go into all the detail of how those cuts are having an impact, but they are.

We have seen whole-time crews cut in Northern Ireland, which means that in many locations crews cannot deploy without part-time firefighters being available to provide them with the full complement they need to attend an incident. That is a matter of concern. That is in no way to question the professionalism of part-time firefighters—far from it—but it is an unsatisfactory situation for the fire and rescue service to be in, because it can result in delays while full-time fire crews wait for their part-time colleagues to arrive before they can respond to an incident.

That is a having an impact on response times for fire crews in Carrickfergus, Portadown in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson), Omagh, Enniskillen, Newtownards in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and Armagh. The cuts are also having an impact in Londonderry. It concerns us that the capacity of the fire and rescue service to respond to major incidents is being diminished in Northern Ireland.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): My right hon. Friend has outlined a number of towns where fire services will be cut. Does he share my annoyance and concern over the reductions in the fire service in towns that are growing, with a population growth of some 10%, 15% or even 20%?

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: Indeed I do. I have made the point that the population of Northern Ireland has increased in the period I quoted.

We welcome the progress that has been made. The Northern Ireland Fire and Rescue Service does a great job at fire prevention. Its fire safety talks in schools and to community groups have been very successful. Nevertheless, I am concerned that if we have major incidents in Northern Ireland, like we had at the Primark building in the centre of Belfast, the capacity of our fire crews to respond and the specialist equipment that needs to be deployed will have been diminished as a result of the cuts.

Gavin Robinson: My right hon. Friend is right to mention critical incidents. Although he did not refer specifically to cuts in my constituency, the Knock fire station is one of those that houses an aerial appliance, which is crucial for high-rises in the city of Belfast and for Belfast City airport in my constituency. It is important that we not only plan for critical incidents, but have the crews available to resource the appliances that are required.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: My hon. Friend makes an important point about the capacity and ability of the fire and rescue service to respond to major incidents such as one—though we would never want it to happen—at Belfast City airport.
I give that illustration simply to make the point that I would like my Assembly Members and those who represent the towns and cities that I have mentioned to be able to scrutinise properly how our budgets are being allocated and spent, and to consider the impact on public safety as they do so, as any legislator or political representative would. They are denied the opportunity to do that, and we cannot do it on their behalf properly or effectively. This is not a criticism of any Department or of the civil servants who are making the decisions, but the civil servants themselves would say that the absence of that political input is harmful. It is to the detriment of the people of Northern Ireland.

We cannot go on like this. The current situation is not fair on the people of Northern Ireland. If the Government are returned after the general election, I hope that we will be able to sit down, and if there is not the basis for restoring devolution—if the political parties cannot reach an accommodation—we will take some tough but right decisions to give a degree of accountability and scrutiny back to the political process in Northern Ireland through this Parliament.

5.30 pm

Sir Michael Fallon (Sevenoaks) (Con): I shall be extremely brief, Mr Deputy Speaker, because I am very conscious that some of our colleagues from Northern Ireland also wish to speak and we have a time limit.

I want thoroughly to endorse the contributions of the right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) and the hon. Member for Rochdale (Tony Lloyd) as to the difficulties the House is placed in now by this process, whereby we are not able to scrutinise properly the expenditure of the Northern Ireland Departments. When we had the equivalent legislation 18 months ago, I tabled amendments seeking to curtail the expenditure on the prosecution of our military veterans. In the 18 months since I withdrew those amendments, we have seen those prosecutions continue and, indeed, accelerate, in quite an arbitrary way and, as usual, in a very unfair way, in that members of the armed forces are being put first in the firing line.

I am therefore extremely pleased by the progress that has been made by the new Government since July. The consultation has finished and we have had the commitment in the Queen’s Speech to legislation, a commitment repeated again by the Prime Minister today. I urge my right hon. and hon. Friends to continue to make progress on that, to see whether it is possible to construct some presumption against prosecution in cases that were too long ago, in cases that have already been investigated and in cases where there is no new evidence. I would add a fourth criterion: where a member of the armed forces genuinely believed he was doing his duty. None the less, I welcome the progress that has been made and I very much hope the Minister will reassure me that we will soon proceed to early legislation, because, as I said when I spoke in the House 18 months ago, this issue is not going to go away, however difficult and complex it is. From my time in the Ministry of Defence, I understand the difficulties that the Northern Ireland Office is faced with in trying to resolve it, but this issue will not go away and I hope the Minister will reassure me that progress really will be made at the beginning of the next Parliament.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Deputy Speaker (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. Before I call the next speaker, may I say that I must bring in the Front Benchers at 5.40 pm?

5.32 pm

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): First, let me say that the Secretary of State is being very optimistic if he thinks this is the last time he will be bringing such a Bill to this House. I have listened to every Secretary of State over the past three years who has brought the budget Bill to the Floor of the House say that they hoped it would be the last time. They have even had the same Northern Ireland Office line in their speech that, “We are close to getting an agreement on the restoration of the Assembly.” I really do think it is time that instead of listening to the Sinn Féin spin that comes from the NIO, he looks at the reality on the ground, which is this: despite the fact that the absence of an Assembly hurts Sinn Féin’s constituencies greatly, Sinn Féin still refuses to go back into the Assembly.

We have heard here today about the mitigations on welfare reform. A recent survey found that most of the people who will be hurt will be in Sinn Féin constituencies, yet Sinn Féin is still happy to plough on and face the end of this financial year, when people will be hit with huge bills because housing benefit will be reduced and some of the other mitigation measures that were put in place will no longer be there. Yet still Sinn Féin says that we are not going to have the Assembly.

We have heard here today about something that would benefit a Sinn Féin constituency. I happen to think it is a wrong decision, although I am sure my hon. Friend the Member for East Londonderry (Mr Campbell) will disagree with me on this—I am referring to putting a medical school into Londonderry. There are good arguments—including the economies of scale and other benefits—for saying that we should just enlarge the one at Queen’s University. I guarantee that had Ministers been in place in the Assembly, we would already have the medical school in Londonderry, yet Sinn Féin are quite happy to sit it out and see a Sinn Féin constituency without that important facility that would bring a lot of benefits to that constituency, although it might not be the best thing for Northern Ireland as a whole.

We have heard time and again in this place about the victims of historical abuse. Martin McGuinness drove that work forward, yet the closure of the Assembly has denied those people the justice and support that they thought they would get. Sinn Féin are still unmov ing and will not go back into the Assembly.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): The right hon. Gentleman is making a powerful speech. It will not come as a galloping shock for him to hear that I have been campaigning for the medical school in Londonderry. Does he agree that what Sinn Féin are really worried about is having a whole new electorate that would not vote for them in a tight marginal seat?

Sammy Wilson: That may well be the case. On the face of it, Sinn Féin say they support the idea, but they are quite happy to sit out the Assembly so that no decision is made on it.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) pointed out, the Assembly met recently because of the whole issue of changes in
respect of abortion law, which exercises tens of thousands of Sinn Féin supporters who come from a Catholic tradition, yet Sinn Féin sat out the Assembly rather than go in to address the issue. If the Secretary of State thinks Sinn Féin are just on the brink of going into the Assembly then, to use a Northern Ireland colloquialism, his head is full of sweetie mice. It is not going to happen. They have shown time and again that they are not prepared to make that decision, even when it is unpopular with their own electorate.

That brings me to the inadequacy of what we are doing today. The Secretary of State has made it quite clear that there is no additional money for Northern Ireland; the Bill will simply ensure that, of the money allocated in the budget, the remaining part that was not allocated when we last debated these issues will now be made available to see us through to the end of the financial year.

The Bill does, though, have a substantial impact on Northern Ireland. People have mentioned the lack of scrutiny. Of course, this is not the only way in which the Northern Ireland; people have mentioned the lack of money made available to see us through to the end of the financial year.

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Box today for possibly the last time. He has been one of the finest Members to grace this House and a friend to many. He will be sorely missed once he finally leaves this Chamber.

**Stephen Pound:** I am not entirely sure that I accept that. I am obviously grateful to my good friend and colleague. However, I was slightly knocked back by the extraordinary comment of the hon. Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), who compared me with a prehistoric ruin on the North Antrim coast. I am quite proud to be compared with the Giant's Causeway, but if I were to be any feature of the Northern Irish landscape, I prefer to think of myself as Carrickfergus castle, a doughty defender of Northern Ireland. That would also enable me to keep an eye on the right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) on a regular basis.

Time is very short. We have heard excellent contributions, not just from the Chair of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for North Dorset, but also from the right hon. Members for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon), for Lagan Valley and for East Antrim.

As has been intimated, this will be the last occasion at which I stand at the Dispatch Box. I am delighted that it is on an issue that means so much—an issue that has come to dominate my life in many ways, but one that I willingly allow to so do. If there is one thing that typifies what could be best about this House, it is the way in which we are so often united on this subject. Equally, this issue typifies the House at our worst, because we seem to be incapable of resolving it. I would have hoped that my last appearance at the Dispatch Box would have been to say that a restored Assembly and Executive are now taking the lead in Northern Ireland. It may be said that I have my head full of wee sweetie mice; I do not know. I like to think that I am an optimist, and I like to think that the great people of Northern Ireland Members and particularly the officials and officers of the NIO, who have done such an extraordinary amount of work. May they soon be able to return to the work that they should be doing, where they should be doing it. In the meantime, all I can do is to say thank you and goodnight.

My colleagues and I will not oppose this Bill tonight. Reluctantly, we support it. We pay tribute to the Ministers who have brought this legislation forward, all the Northern Ireland Members and particularly the officials and officers of the NIO, who have done such an extraordinary amount of work. May they soon be able to return to the work that they should be doing, where they should be doing it. In the meantime, all I can do is to say thank you and goodnight.

5.46 pm

**The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Nick Hurd):** May I start by paying tribute to the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound)? I previously served for a long time with a shadow brief, and I would say the key thing is to care about it, and the hon. Gentleman does deeply and that comes through. He has earned a great deal of respect across the House in that position. Tonight he has been compared to on historical monument—listed or listing, I was not sure—but of course he also represents a constituency that has the magnificent Ealing pyramids. Surely this may be time for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) and for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) to consider commissioning a statue to sit alongside them. I thank him for his service and for his very kind remarks about officials, who often do not get the appreciation they deserve.

I thank the Labour Front Bench and the DUP for their constructive approach to the Bill. Whatever we feel about the circumstances of why and when we are here, it is recognised that this Bill is necessary—otherwise, emergency powers will have to be used that will see the people of Northern Ireland short-changed in terms of their public services, and we cannot allow that. This Bill is absolutely necessary, and I thank Labour and the DUP for their recognition of that. However, the debate did reflect a great deal of frustration across the House about the state of democracy in Northern Ireland at this moment in time. The Secretary of State expressed his frustration, although of course I will never be able to look at him in the same light now that I know his head is full of sweetie mice.

**Stephen Pound:** I think it would be appropriate at this time to mention the debt of gratitude that the House owes to the right hon. Member for South Ruislip and Northwood, who is also leaving the House. I just want to place on record the Chairman’s appreciation for his work. In the short time that he has held this brief, he has immersed himself in it and has won the respect of Members on both sides of the Chamber. We wish him well and thank him for his service to date.

**Mr Hurd:** I am really grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I do not want to appear churlish, but in fact I am the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner, although I am sure that the current Member for South Ruislip—the Prime Minister—will be grateful for the appreciation shown.

The central theme of this excellent debate was one of profound frustration at the state of democracy in Northern Ireland. This was reflected by the Secretary of State and the shadow Secretary of State, who raised important issues about the quality of scrutiny available—a point reflected passionately on the DUP Benches, not least by the right hon. Members for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) and for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson). My hon. and gallant Friend the Member for North Dorset (Simon Hoare), spoke really well in warning against tolerance of a new norm around the listless process of decision making that we are in. That is not to denigrate in any way the hard work of civil servants in Northern Ireland. I could not have higher regard for David Sterling and his team there. They are in a very difficult situation and they do a difficult job.

In the time remaining, I should respond quickly to some specific and very important points, particularly around mitigation of welfare reforms, which was also touched on in oral questions. There is a significant issue approaching in terms of the so-called cliff edge in March 2020. That is a very serious matter, given that we are talking about mitigations that help to support many thousands of the most vulnerable people in Northern Ireland. There are powers available to the relevant Department, but they present administrative challenges and are sub-optimal as a response. The best response is through the law, and the best way of doing that is through the Northern Ireland Executive. I hope that the shadow Secretary of State heard the response of the Secretary of State and is willing to lean in on that.
5.50 pm  
One and a half hours having elapsed since the commencement of proceedings on the allocation of time motion, the Deputy Speaker put the Question (Order, this day).  
Question agreed to.  

Bill accordingly read a Second time; to stand committed to a Committee of the whole House (Order, this day).

Clause 1  

ISSUE OF SUM OUT OF THE CONSOLIDATED FUND FOR THE YEAR ENDING 31 MARCH 2020 AND APPROPRIATION OF THAT SUM  

Question proposed, That the clause stand part of the Bill.

The Chairman: With this it will be convenient to consider clauses 2 to 7 and schedules 1 and 2 stand part.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Nick Hurd): In speaking to clause 1 stand part, I will also try to address very briefly the issue of housing associations, which I did not have time to do in my closing speech on Second Reading.

Clause 1 authorises the issue out of the Consolidated Fund of Northern Ireland the sum of just over £5.3 billion. The allocation levels for each Northern Ireland Department and the other bodies in receipt of these funds are set out in schedule 1, which also states the purpose for which the funds are to be used. The authorisations and appropriations in this clause are a balance to complete in addition to the vote on account previously authorised in section 4 and in column 2 of schedule 3 of the Northern Ireland Budget (Anticipation and Adjustments) Act 2019.

I will now address the issue of housing associations out of respect to previous comments made. The Government, to be very clear, recognise the absolute importance of housing associations as the main mechanism for delivery of social and affordable homes. We agree 100% that classification as public sector has serious implications for their funding stream, for the reasons cited in the debate. We completely agree, therefore, that action must be taken, and the Government are committed to taking forward legislation to facilitate reclassification as soon as parliamentary time allows. I hope that the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) will realise that standing here today on the brink of an election I do not feel I can give a guarantee of a specific time, but I can say that this will be a priority for this Government, if re-elected, and that officials are continuing to work closely with officials in Northern Ireland to facilitate it.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Perhaps the Minister could give us some clarity. In the past, we have been told that the reason why the legislation could not come forward is that it had not been properly prepared by either the Department for Communities or the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland. Then we were told that it had to come through the Northern Ireland Office. Has the legislation been prepared by the appropriate Department in Northern Ireland? Has it been approved to come forward to the Treasury here in Westminster? If it has reached that stage, when did it reach that stage? If it has not, what are the impediments?
Mr Hurd: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his question. I am informed that officials have been making preparations to facilitate its introduction. I can confirm that a draft Bill exists and has been translated into the Westminster format, and NIO officials continue to work closely with officials in the Department for Communities and the Cabinet Office to make further progress towards introduction. I have spoken to the permanent secretary in the Department of Finance in Northern Ireland, and I know that she is extremely enthusiastic to see this through, as we are. I regret that I cannot give an absolute guarantee of an exact time when this will happen. The hon. Member for Belfast East will know why that is the case, but I am clear that the good will and the commitment are there, because we recognise the fundamental importance of the issue raised and the ramifications of the existing classifications.

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): I want to repeat something I raised earlier. I do not necessarily expect the Minister to give a response in this debate, but perhaps we could get some kind of response today. Once again, this relates to the situation of the victims of institutional abuse. If we are not going to see the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill brought through the House of Commons, is there any capacity in the Consolidated Fund to make some form of payment, to at least acknowledge the fact that those victims of institutional abuse exist and that they suffered? It would be, we could say, a down payment. Is there legal capacity for the Secretary of State, the NIO or the Northern Ireland civil service to authorise that kind of payment?

Mr Hurd: I thank the shadow Secretary of State for his question. He asked about that on Second Reading, and I apologise for not having the time to respond directly. On his broader question, I can confirm that this budget is putting on a sound legal basis the draft budget debated earlier for this financial year. The short answer to his question is that it does not include provisions for the implementation of the Stormont House agreement institutions, and it does not include consideration of the consequences of implementing the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill. I wholly agree, as I know the Secretary of State would, that that Bill must be a priority for Governments of any colour. If I was not clear enough before, I am not going to get any clearer now. The language in the document in front of me tells me that this is an extremely co-operative process. I do not think that the legislation is stuck in the NIO or the NICS, which is his concern. Everything here tells me that officials are working closely with the Department for Communities, the NIO and the Cabinet Office to make further progress towards introduction. I will go away and take further advice on that, but there is nothing here that tells me there is a hard impediment; it is just that I cannot, with any good faith, stand here and give a firm timetable under the circumstances we are in.

6 pm

Lady Hermon (North Down) (Ind): The Minister will be aware, because we had Northern Ireland questions before Prime Minister’s questions earlier today, that the right hon. Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) asked the Prime Minister directly for a commitment about the legislation to compensate the victims of appalling historical institutional abuse in Northern Ireland. We have a moral responsibility to compensate those victims, and we cannot allow the five weeks of a general election to prevent them receiving the compensation that is long overdue to them. I am alarmed at the response the Minister gave to the shadow Secretary of State for Northern Ireland because he seemed to be ambivalent about that legislation coming through before the general election. I want the Minister to give a clear, unequivocal commitment to the victims of historical institutional abuse that that legislation will—will—come through this House before this House is dissolved next week.

Mr Hurd: I do not think I can give that hard guarantee to the hon. Lady. I know exactly why she is pressing me for it, and I have huge sympathy with what she is saying—and I know sympathy does not cut it—but she will know that parliamentary time is now extremely limited. It may well be, as I think Lord Ashton has indicated in the Lords today, that there is not time for the Bill to pass through both Houses. However, the hon. Lady certainly has my assurance—and I believe I speak on behalf of the Secretary of State; the hon. Lady knows how passionately he feels about this—that this will be tested very hard by us.

The hon. Lady will also know, given the importance and the sensitivity of the Bill, that we must obviously make sure it is properly considered so that victims of institutional abuse in Northern Ireland get the redress they deserve as quickly as possible. That is not a light consideration; it does require some proper scrutiny. I do not think anyone in the House is happy either that we are in the situation we are in with this Bill or about the absence of the HIA Bill, but we are where we are with the parliamentary time being extremely limited.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Will the Minister just clarify this for us if he can? If the HIA legislation is not brought forward and this Parliament finishes on...
Tuesday, as it probably will, does that mean all that legislation falls, and are we just to start again next time around? If so, that is appalling.

Mr Hurd: I agree that it would be extremely regrettable, but if that is the situation, it is for the new Government, of whatever colour, to establish their priorities. What I can say, having spoken to the Secretary of State about it, is that we have a deep commitment to doing this. It is a priority for all the reasons that we have stated. The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) talked about a moral responsibility, and of course she is absolutely right.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): Given what the Minister has said, may I urge him to do two things? First, will he try to get clarification about this issue as quickly as possible? Right now, the many survivors of terrible abuse will be deeply upset and worried, and they need to have clarity. If we can get that tonight, that would be good. Secondly, we have heard reference to an interim payment, and if it is not possible to put forward the commitment he has given. I recognise the constraints, but this issue cannot wait indefinitely.

Mr Hurd: I understand completely the points being made from various people in the Committee and the underlying reasons and motivation. I have a huge amount of sympathy, and I give an undertaking to try to establish some clarity this evening or first thing tomorrow morning, so that everyone knows where they stand, and we will do that through the normal channels.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): Given what the Minister has said, may I urge him to do two things? First, will he try to get clarification about this issue as quickly as possible? Right now, the many survivors of terrible abuse will be deeply upset and worried, and they need to have clarity. If we can get that tonight, that would be good. Secondly, we have heard reference to an interim payment, and if it is not possible to put forward the detailed legislation, would it be possible to take through a much simpler piece of legislation with an accelerated passage, as is being done with this Bill today? That would at least give the Secretary of State or somebody the ability to make payments—simple payments—and then, after the election, the detailed process could kick in, because many of these victims are in desperate need.

Mr Hurd: I understand completely the points being made from various people in the Committee and the underlying reasons and motivation. I have a huge amount of sympathy, and I give an undertaking to try to establish some clarity this evening or first thing tomorrow morning, so that everyone knows where they stand, and we will do that through the normal channels.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP) rose—

The Chairman of Ways and Means (Sir Lindsay Hoyle): Order. I am always very lenient because I want to allow Members to broaden the debate a little, but I do not want to diverge from where we should be at the Committee stage; hence I want to save time for Third Reading to allow Members to broaden it further. I believe the Minister is giving way to Gavin Robinson.

Gavin Robinson: Thank you, Sir Lindsay. When the Bill to make restitution payments in some part to victims of HIA passed its Second Reading in the House of Lords, was there an associated carry-over motion? Is there any certainty that the Bill will be resurrected in the new Parliament? Can the Minister give us some clarity on that?

Mr Hurd: I will try to give the House some clarity, ideally before the end of Third Reading.

Gavin Robinson: I will be brief, given the need to move on to Third Reading. You mentioned, Sir Lindsay, that an amendment to the Bill had been tabled, and I want to place on record my thanks for the positive and dextrous way in which you and the Public Bill Office considered it. I also thank the Minister for his response on Co-Ownership.

I recognise that the Minister is constrained in giving a definitive timescale for passing legislation, but I want to make it clear that the commitment he gave this evening was given to me in exactly the same debate a year ago. A promise and commitment was given then to rectify this small, discrete issue. Of course, the Ministers who gave that commitment are no longer Ministers. The Minister realises that I hold him in high regard, but with the greatest respect, he will not be here to follow through his pledge.

We need certainty. I asked whether there would be a carry-over motion for the HIA Bill because HIA victims need certainty. It would be an appalling dereliction if the House of Lords did not, in passing Second Reading of that Bill, associate a carry-over motion with it, because otherwise we must start again. In the run-up to Christmas, we will simply sign in, then in the immediate aftermath of Christmas and the new year, we will get another Queen’s Speech. Then for another week or two we will discuss the Gracious Speech and the Humble Address, so there will be no progress on that legislation, which cannot be brought back or reintroduced until the end of January at the earliest, subject to the business managers. That is completely substandard.

The issue of co-ownership, which I have been pushing, must be resolved by the end of the financial year—legislation must be passed by 31 March. I know it is small, but we as Members just piddled about this place whenever the Supreme Court asked us to come back, and we did nothing. No substantive business was put before us, yet we had a commitment on co-ownership legislation a year ago and that was never brought before us.

I must say that the Secretary of State has been good on HIA. His predecessors did not move at all; they said, “I’m sorry, this is a matter for the Executive. The report must go back to the Executive, and it is for the Executive to decide how to go forward.” I am grateful for the injection of progress he has brought, but sadly, given how this Parliament has evolved, it is too little, too late.

I make those points in gratitude to you, Sir Lindsay, for the consideration given to the amendment that was tabled, to the Public Bill Office and to the Minister for the commitment he has given. I recognise the constraints, but this issue cannot wait indefinitely.

Question put and agreed to.

Clause 1 accordingly ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Clauses 2 to 7 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 and 2 agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Third Reading

6.9 pm

Mr Hurd: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

I thank the House for the debate that we have had on this important Bill and recognise the frustrations attached to it because of the timetable, the pace and the lack of resolution on some extremely important issues, not least to do with the passage of the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill 2019, which, I can confirm to the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson), did not have a carry-over motion in the House of Lords.

I will direct the frustrations of the House about that to the Secretary of State and, through him, to the business
managers. I also recognise the frustration, now I am better informed about the background, about the questions on the housing association issue that have clearly dragged on for a long time. That perhaps explains the line of questioning, but I am where I am, at the Dispatch Box today, and I think there is a genuine commitment. I am not aware of any serious impediments. I hope that that gives Members some reassurance.

We see this as a defensible, limited and sensible intervention at this time, and one that is in line with the approach taken since the collapse of the Executive in January 2017. We take very seriously our commitment to good governance in Northern Ireland and this Bill, vitally, does not preclude a new Executive, should they be formed within the financial year, from making budget adjustments if they see fit and amending legislation in the usual way at the end of the financial year. Crucially, we have heard that the impact of not passing this legislation would be Northern Ireland Departments being unable to access the full Northern Ireland block grant for 2019-20. Of course, that would have a very serious impact on the delivery of public services in Northern Ireland. The absence of legislation to underpin departmental spending would quickly become a systemic risk that would be unacceptable to all sides of the House. I thank the House for its consideration of the Bill, despite all the frustrations attached to it.

This is my last appearance at the Dispatch Box after almost nine years as a Minister and almost five years before that as a shadow Minister. I am delighted that this Bill is making its passage so that we can ensure that Northern Ireland has the budget it deserves, and so that the public services that the people we serve and represent rely on can continue to be delivered in the best possible way under the most difficult, frustrating and trying circumstances. Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): It is very sad that this is the Minister’s last time at the Dispatch Box and in the House, and it is very sad that so many distinguished parliamentarians will not speak again from these Benches. This House will be the poorer for their not being here. I thank the Minister for the way he has conducted his business today and throughout his career in this place.

6.13 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Let me put on record my thanks to the Minister for the help he gave my constituents, Sophia, Darren and Danielle Gibson in Newtownards, in relation to medicinal cannabis and the related methodology—working, in all fairness, with the Department of Health in Northern Ireland to make that happen. He will have received the card that we all got to say thank you, and he has the one with wee Sophia’s photograph. I am sure he still has it; I have one in my office, too. I thank him so much, and wish him well as he moves on.

This is not the first time that I have spoken on Third Reading of a Northern Ireland Budget Bill debate and bemoaned the state of finances in Departments in Northern Ireland. We find ourselves in the difficult situation of having no functioning devolved Assembly. We have a seriously limited local council system; its powers are not on a par with those held by councils throughout the rest of the United Kingdom—that is a fact of life. We have a Westminster Parliament that has intervened only when legally necessary—other than to impose abortion against the will of the people of Northern Ireland. I find that disturbing, and my constituents in Strangford and people across Northern Ireland find it unacceptable. As I have said numerous times in this Chamber, either direct rule in its entirety should be implemented or legislation to call for an Assembly election should be introduced with the prerequisite that anyone who stands must take their seats and nominate accordingly.

Emma Little Pengelly: As my hon. Friend is outlining, there is currently very limited decision making in Northern Ireland. However, he will have been very pleased, as I was, to hear the announcement just this week that, through Northern Ireland’s active participation in the English and Welsh negotiations for Orkambi and other drugs, that will be made available at a better price, as I understand it, for Northern Ireland and England than the Scottish deal. Does he agree that that is a very good announcement? I also highlight the hard work that he and many people in Northern Ireland have done on this campaign.

Jim Shannon: I thank my hon. Friend for what she said. There has been a joint campaign to have the Vertex drug available for those with cystic fibrosis. I am thankful for the decision, but we need to move this a stage further. As she said, it would be better if we had the legislation in place to make sure that we get it in Northern Ireland—we should do. We met Jen Banks and her wee boy here in the House. I also have a constituent in Newtownards who suffers from the same thing and who needs the drug immediately, so it would be great if that happened.

I am glad that the election has been called. I am happy to put myself before my constituents knowing that I have consistently done what I believe to be right in this House, yet I am disheartened by the conduct in this place. We seem to have lost our sense of honour and of being people of our word and doing the right thing—we in the DUP corner of the House certainly feel that way. I still continue to do that and should I be re-elected, I will continue to do so. Only a few weeks ago, it was remarkable that across the House, everybody could turn up, when they were putting the backstop in place, to do us over, yet where are they tonight? When it comes to being honourable people and doing the right thing, I find that I have seen less of it in this House over the last period. There are many in this House who I am good friends with, and I intend to be good friends with them forever, but I do feel let down and I want to put that on record.

The Northern Ireland Budget Bill will enable day-to-day life to continue in the Province. We have come through a number of years of austerity. Although I can comprehend the rationale behind that, it is difficult to watch the daily effects of it. Our streets are untidy, because Transport NI can no longer afford to address the weeds, never mind resurface the roads, but I am pleased to note from my most recent correspondence with Transport NI that the spend allocated for Strangford in 2018-19 is just over £11 million, which is almost a combination of that for 2016-17 and 2017-18.

I am reminded of a song from when I was a wee boy—that was not yesterday, by the way. We probably all know it from our childhood: “Four wheels on my...
wagon and I’m still rolling along”; “Three wheels on my wagon and I’m still rolling along”—then two wheels, then one wheel, but do you know something? When there are no wheels on the wagon, you do not roll along at all. What we find with the Northern Ireland Assembly is that we are not rolling along. What a disappointment that we are not doing anything the way we should be. There are no wheels on my wagon—or no wheels on the Assembly’s wagon, I should say, and we are not rolling anywhere. [Laughter.]

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): “You can watch those Cherokees go galloping by”—it is a great old song. I get the point that the hon. Gentleman is making by using that song as an example. No wheels on his wagon, he is not rolling along: the Cherokees have captured him, but he is still singing a happy song.

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. It is the Assembly that is not rolling along. I am rolling along very well actually, just to let you know—no problem with me. Even though I am a diabetic—type 2—I can still keep going, and the Duracell battery is what I have to keep me going. The rest of the batteries fail—Shannon still keeps going. Just remember that. [Laughter.]

More money has been allocated to my area, which can only be a good thing, as we are in desperate need of basic infrastructure. There is huge potential in my area and local towns for international investment and so much more. We have state-of-the-art office space, UK-wide connectivity and low business rates. The long-term goal is to show the world that Northern Ireland is the place to invest in business. It is the place to produce television shows—scenes from “Game of Thrones” were filmed locally and supplied by local people. We can provide a high-class graduate labour force and an abundance of admin staff as well.

One of the key components to unlocking local investment is the ability to connect easily, and that includes good roads and transport. I will seek additional funding to improve connectivity to Belfast airport for those looking for the perfect place to invest. With due respect to my colleagues, the perfect place to invest is Newtownards and the surrounding areas. Infrastructure has a massive role to play. I have said it before, but I will say it again—this is the end of term: we need the Ballynahinch bypass. That town is being held back from growing the way it should because it does not have a bypass. The land is acquired and the scheme is in place, but the go-ahead needed from the Northern Ireland Assembly is not there.

Spending on the Department of Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs rose from £13.6 million in 2016-17 to £50 million in 2018-19, but our upcoming exit from Europe means that more funding must be allocated. I was pleased to read that additional funding has been allocated specifically to address Brexit issues, not simply for DAERA, but across the Northern Ireland Departments. I am pleased with what DAERA has done in my constituency. It has allocated and committed significant moneys to the Northern Ireland countryside management scheme. The money allocated to tackling rural poverty and social isolation—something else I am particularly interested in—has increased for the last three years. The substantial money for the rural development programme in the last year has also been great. This money has addressed many of the issues that are prevalent in the countryside. DAERA is doing that. It should do better if we had a Minister in place, but it is doing very well.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): On DAERA, does my hon. Friend agree that the issue of the veterinary school in Coleraine has been going on too long and needs to be processed, alongside the medical school in Londonderry? There are so many projects sitting there waiting for approval, but we need ministerial intervention to ensure they proceed.

Jim Shannon: My hon. Friend makes a most helpful intervention. It would benefit the whole Province, not just his constituency.

Education needs a massive injection of sustained funding, not one-off projects. Schools have not received the correct inflation-based moneys they need. I have been liaising with the Education Authority and the Secretary of State to ensure that schools have enough funding to sustain the high-level quality education expected in Northern Ireland. We must also find a solution to the union issue. I look to the Minister, as we always do, to outline how he intends to ensure that teachers and staff are happy and being appropriately paid and correctly treated. I gently ask him to intervene so that after-school clubs, which often round out social education, can continue without teachers having to break through the picket line.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) referred to the importance of special educational needs provision in schools. The hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon) and I have constituents who attend Clifton Special School in Bangor—60% of its pupils come from my constituency—but it needs investment, as does Killard House School. Our teachers and staff do a phenomenal job with finite resources that are not rising in line with inflation or the increased expectations from parents. It is past time we resolved the union issues. Although the Education Authority has been working on this, perhaps ministerial intervention is needed to push it over the line. Information I have shows that, although more money has been allocated this year, the fact that the 2016-17 allocation was so low means that all we are doing is playing catch-up.

We need to address those things. The money available to individual schools may have increased since 2016, but it does not make up for the two years of underfunding. We are nowhere near where we need to be. I feel frustrated, but I look forward to a new Parliament and a new opportunity to push for appropriate funding for Northern Ireland. In the meantime, however, I have no option other than to support the Bill so that we can keep ticking over until direct rule or a fit-for-purpose Assembly does the right thing and takes its seat.

When I met the Chief Constable, Simon Byrne, just over a month ago, I raised two issues with him. I asked him to ensure that a police training system was in place, and to give me a commitment, if the funds were there and he had the wherewithal, to train 1,000 officers in order to increase the number to the necessary 7,500. He gave an important commitment on community policing, in which I am a great believer: I think that every one of us who represents a constituency anywhere in Northern Ireland understands how important it is.
Our hospitals need more funds. The money allocated to each trust area is not adequate. I want especially to thank the permanent secretary of the Department of Health in Northern Ireland, Richard Pengelly, who has said this:

“it costs £26 billion a year to run Northern Ireland but only £17 billion is being raised. The amount needed to maintain the health service goes up each year. At the moment to run the same service this year as we did last year and next year, it’s about 6% increase per annum. If we continue on that trajectory, within about 20 years the health service will need virtually all the money that’s available”

—in the block grant—

“to the executive.”

Richard Pengelly thinks that we need a new health strategy in Northern Ireland that will focus on diabetes, heart, stroke and cancer services and occupational therapy, and on the fact that the waiting lists for operations are getting longer and longer.

Let me make three final points. There will be a greater need for health services for an ageing population that is growing dramatically. In mid-2018, 308,200 people were 65 or older, and 37,700 of those were 85 or older. Given that we are producing fewer children, the pressure will be on healthcare for that ageing population.

I want to say something about cancer care, because cancer affects so many people. So many of my friends have contracted it recently, or, unfortunately, have passed away as a result of it. It is a major issue, especially in an ageing population. The most common cancers in men are cancers of the prostate and lung, and the most common in women are cancers of the breast and lung. Successive one-year budgets are impeding planning and investment in Northern Ireland’s health and social care services; we need the money to ensure that those things happen.

Early diagnosis and care at the outset are extremely important. A significant proportion of cases in Northern Ireland are diagnosed at a late stage: 20% are diagnosed at stage 3, and 26% at stage 4. Late diagnosis can be due to a number of factors, but what we need is earlier diagnosis, which will save lives, help our health service, and, in particular, help those with cancer. We also need a system that will shorten the timescale between the visit to the GP and referral to a consultant.

My last point is about mental health. My right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds) has fought the case for mental health treatment extremely well in the House. We all have constituents with mental health issues, and I am very conscious of the need for funds to address them. There is a particularly high level of mental health issues, such as post-traumatic stress disorder, among those who have served our Province in uniform—in the police, the Army and other emergency services. Another issue that I face every day is the mental health of children, especially those at primary and secondary school level.

I thank you for your patience and your time, Mr Speaker. I just wanted to put on record how many things need to be done in Northern Ireland, and how many things could be done if we had a working Assembly that could respond to all the people there—and who is holding that back? Sinn Féin.

Question put and agreed to.
Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

Business of the House

6.29 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): I should like to make a statement regarding the business for tomorrow and until Tuesday 5 November.

Tomorrow, the House will be asked to consider a motion relating to the first report from the Committee on Standards, followed by tributes to the Speaker’s Chaplain, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the Northern Ireland (Extension of Period for Executive Formation) (No. 2) Regulations 2019, followed by a motion to approve a statutory instrument relating to the draft (Civil Partnership) (Opposite-sex Couples) Regulations 2019, followed by, if necessary, consideration of Lords amendments. The House will not adjourn until Royal Assent has been received to all Acts.

The business for the week commencing 4 November will include:

MONDAY 4 NOVEMBER.—The House will meet at 2.30 o’clock to elect a Speaker.

TUESDAY 5 NOVEMBER.—An opportunity for Members to make short valedictory speeches and to debate matters to be raised before the forthcoming Dissolution.

Mr Speaker, I might add that I shall make my normal statement tomorrow, which will also be an opportunity for people, in the course of that statement, to raise questions in the form of tributes to you.

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I think that I should say thank you to the Leader of the House, but I am somewhat confused. Can he confirm whether there will be absolutely no business questions tomorrow and that what he will do at 10.30 is start the tributes to Mr Speaker? That is my first question. I can see why he perhaps would not want to be here on 31 October—a significant day—answering questions from hon. Members. It seems like the Government are melting away, along with the commemorative 50p pieces. We all know that it is a significant day.

I am slightly perturbed because I have not seen any reference to the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill, which is currently in the House of Lords. It is an extremely important Bill that provides a redress scheme for survivors of historical institutional abuse in Northern Ireland. The House of Lords is expediting all its stages tomorrow, and it is keen to get it on the statute book. The survivors who will benefit from the Bill are content with the legislation, and I know that the shadow Minister is content with the legislation. The survivors who will benefit from the Bill are keen to agree with the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland that it should be on the statute book. The survivors cannot wait any longer. Some have passed away while waiting for the compensation that they are rightly owed. Will the Leader of the House make time for this important Bill?

I have had lots of mixed messages, and I do not think this is a good way to end this Session. I was not sure whether business questions were on. First they were on, then they were off, and then they were on again. This is not an appropriate way to carry out the business of the House, particularly as many Members are standing
down and business questions are a good opportunity, just before an election, for them to raise issues that they might be able to deal with when they go back to their constituencies. So I hope that the Leader of the House will take on board those three questions relating to what time he is going to start, whether business questions will be in the form of questions or a statement and, particularly, what will happen to the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The hon. Lady said that we were trying to avoid saying things tomorrow, and she referred to those 50p coins. I am afraid that I have never liked fiddling around with our coinage. I prefer the 50p coins with Britannia on the back, rather than the ones that have all sorts of peculiar—

Kevin Brennan (Cardiff West) (Lab): What about a 10 shilling note?

Mr Rees-Mogg: What an excellent idea, shouted out from the back! Bring back the 10 shilling note! I think that is a little old-fashioned, even for me, but it is reassuring that some Members are even more antediluvian than I am.

On the important question of the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill, I note what the right hon. Lady says about what is happening in the other place. We need to wait and see what happens there, and we will then be able to come to a decision on what can be done in this House. It will, of course, mean that there will be another business statement from me. That is becoming a daily occurrence at the moment.

The hon. Lady mentioned the business statement tomorrow, which will be a statement on tributes to Mr Speaker. The questions that arise will of course be whatever Mr Speaker rules orderly, so I think that Members will be careful to work out what is orderly in that respect. I am really pleased to have been able to announce that right hon. and hon. Members who are standing down will have the opportunity to make their valedictory addresses on Tuesday in the form of the Adjournment debate. That is a debate that I am very much looking forward to responding to, as it is an important opportunity not only for people to say their farewells but for their service to this House—in some cases, over many decades—to be acknowledged. I hope that that answers the hon. Lady’s questions.

Simon Hoare (North Dorset) (Con): May I briefly underscore what the shadow Leader of the House said to the Leader of the House about the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill? It has cross-party support in this place, as my right hon. Friend knows, and the Select Committee on Northern Ireland Affairs has looked at it in great depth. I will not labour the point, but I know my right hon. Friend is aware of the pressing need for the delivery of justice and the start of closure. I am pretty certain that the legislation could be dealt with in 35 minutes to 40 minutes on Monday following discussions through the usual channels. If he will be so kind, I urge him to find the time to make that important step forward, because the wait has been far too long.

Mr Rees-Mogg: My hon. Friend the Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee is absolutely right to highlight the importance of that Bill, and the Government are committed to bringing it forth as soon as possible. I congratulate him on his service to the people of Northern Ireland and to the people of Dorset—something that he carries out with great distinction. I am biased, of course, because he is one of my oldest friends in this Chamber, so I do listen to him particularly carefully. I have absolutely heard his message, as I have heard the message from the shadow Leader of the House. Let us see what their lordships do. The normal processes will then grind through, and we will see what can be done.

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): There is nothing too old-fashioned for the right hon. Gentleman. I think we are all getting used to these daily business statements, and we look forward to another thrilling episode tomorrow. However, I had real concerns when I saw this business statement about whether there would be standard business questions tomorrow, because I remember the right hon. Gentleman’s clear commitment that there would be the opportunity for tributes to Mr Speaker. I am pleased and relieved to see that that is included in the statement and that there may be the opportunity to discuss other matters as we conclude this Parliament.

I am very concerned about the business for next week, and the arrangements for the election of the next Speaker are particularly unsatisfactory. Members like myself will have to come down all the way from Scotland during an election campaign for the sole purpose of electing a Speaker. I do not know how many hours that will take, but we will have to decide what will be the better use of our time: fighting an election or coming down here to decide the next Speaker. There is a real chance that Members of Parliament from Scotland and elsewhere in the United Kingdom could be disenfranchised in the important business of electing the Speaker.

How have we got to this situation? Conversations were ongoing through the usual channels between the political parties and among the candidates for Speaker about trying to resolve the matter this week, so that the House could dissolve on Thursday or Friday. We could then make the decision about the Speaker when we returned with a new Parliament. What has happened to those conversations? Has there been any blockage? If so, who is responsible? What type of discussions have been had? From speaking to colleagues—not just those within the Scottish National party—there are real concerns about the election of a Speaker happening exclusively on Monday, and we need to better understand what has happened and how we have reached this situation.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman for saying that nothing is too old fashioned for me, and I shall try not to disappoint him in future. I am sorry that his travel arrangements will be inconvenienced, and I mean that genuinely because I appreciate that the situation is difficult for Members who have to come a long way. People must order their priorities accordingly. My personal priority always revolves around the Chamber of the House.

I will point out that a right hon. Friend of mine, whose name I will not give away, will be a long way out of the country on long-planned business and is going to pay £1,000 of his own money to make sure that he is back for an important parliamentary occasion. Some
people take that view of attending for business, and others may indeed wish to start their election campaigns early. That is a choice that they must make. However, Monday and Tuesday are sitting days, and once Mr Speaker has resigned, we must elect a Speaker if the House is sitting. That is completely routine and standard and orderly, and it is important.

I will, if I may, correct the hon. Gentleman on the question of Dissolution, as I was corrected by the hon. Member for Rhondda (Chris Bryant). The date of Dissolution is set backwards from the date of the election. With the election being on Thursday 12 December, Dissolution has to be on Wednesday at one minute past midnight. It cannot be on any other day. There is no flexibility in the terms of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011.

I confess, Mr Speaker, that there were conversations about whether we could have finished tomorrow, but for everybody who said to me that we should stop on Thursday, somebody else said that we should stop on Tuesday. There was no clear consensus. It is my view as Leader of the House that my responsibility if there is no consensus is to ensure that things carry on as they were planned to be. It would be wrong for me to force the House in a way that there was not a consensus to go down.

Karin Smyth (Bristol South) (Lab): Exactly two years ago, I had an Adjournment debate about airgun safety, which was responded to graciously by the right hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), who is in his place. That instigated a review of airgun safety. I and my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson), who is in his place, have pressed the Government persistently for the publication of their review and consultation. Today, I rang my constituent to say again to him and his young son, who was severely injured, that that has not come forward and that we have no idea when it will. Will the Leader of the House please indicate for the families we represent when that important review and consultation will come forward?

I add my support on the need to bring the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill to this House. Front Benchers from all parties have indicated clearly that it will be dealt with very quickly. There is cross-party support and it could be done very quickly next week.

Mr Rees-Mogg: On airgun safety, I will write to the Minister who is responsible to get an answer. There will obviously be no time for a debate on it before this Parliament comes to a conclusion, but it is important that when Members raise questions, they get answers. I cannot always promise people the answer they want, but by and large, it is important that answers are given.

I note the hon. Lady’s point about the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill. It seems that there may be an evolving consensus around that issue in this House.

We do need to get the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Bill through the House before the election. I really hope that the Leader of the House has heard the consensus he has talked about and will work on the basis of that consensus. I add to the point that we can do this very quickly and that it does need to be done. I look forward to his taking it forward.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman, our confidence and supply partner, for his important point. The message is loud and clear. There is—dare I say it?—some element of tension when the Government propose to bring Bills through quickly. There is sometimes criticism that it is being done too quickly. However, it is more normal in a wash-up period that things are done at a certain rate of knots than in other periods. I have heard what has been said, and I will ensure that it is passed on to all the relevant people.

Emma Little Pengelly (Belfast South) (DUP): I echo the comments that have been made about the victims and survivors of historical institutional abuse. In the earlier debate, it was mentioned that the Bill might not be brought forward. I know that many victims will be deeply distressed and dismayed by that. There is an opportunity tomorrow with the further business question, so I wonder whether the Leader of the House can confirm that if there are no issues in the House of Lords—I am not sure what issues he was referring to—time will be made to get the Bill through before Dissolution.

Mr Rees-Mogg: On a purely technical note, we will not be able to make time for that tomorrow, because it is not in the statement that I have now. So the question would be for Monday and then issues may arise relating to Royal Assent, because there is a Royal Assent moment tomorrow, but I am not sure that there will be one on Monday. These issues will be looked into. I have heard from some extraordinarily distinguished Members and note their views, but I cannot give a definitive answer from the Dispatch Box now.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I met the Leader of the House recently to talk about the 100th anniversary of the election of Nancy Astor. The Dissolution of Parliament means that the celebrations of that momentous moment when Plymouth Sutton elected her as the first woman to take her seat will now not take place on the day. I would be grateful if he reflected on whether there is time to record that impressive moment on either Monday or Tuesday next week, so that we do not miss this moment to talk about the important role that Nancy Astor played in this place and in wider British politics.

Mr Rees-Mogg: I am very grateful for that question. I hope that I am not being indiscreet in saying that the Commission discussed this when it met earlier in the week on Monday, just before I had to leave early to come to make an emergency business statement, which seems to be quite a frequent occurrence. The Commission agreed to a series of suggestions, including particularly the hon. Gentleman’s suggestion that there could be a picture in the Members’ Dining Room underneath the picture of Nancy Astor’s presentation and that there would be no hire charge for the room—that has been specifically agreed by the Commission—and the suggestion
[Mr Rees-Mogg]

that we have a commemoration on the Order Paper on the relevant anniversary. Fortunately, there are several relevant anniversaries—for example, the anniversary of her maiden speech. Most of the ideas that he has come up with were warmly endorsed by the Commission. As I say, I hope that I have not broken the Official Secrets Act or anything of that kind by revealing this.

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I would be grateful if the Leader of the House confirmed whether Tuesday’s Westminster Hall business will go ahead. From what he said, I assume that it might, but I just want clarification on that point.

Mr Rees-Mogg: As far as I am aware, business in Westminster Hall will continue as normal. I am being nodded at from the Box, which is always extremely helpful when I am on a slightly sticky wicket. I am glad to say that my forward defensive stroke has kept the ball clear of my stumps.

Mr Speaker: The word “inimitable” springs to mind. I am extremely grateful to the Leader of the House and to colleagues.

PETITION

Dispute between HMRC and Roadchef Employees Benefit Trust

6.47 pm

Martyn Day (Linlithgow and East Falkirk) (SNP): I rise to present a petition on behalf of my constituents regarding the dispute between Her Majesty’s Revenue and Customs and the Roadchef Employees Benefit Trust.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares that concerns about the Roadchef Employees Benefit Trust have escalated to an unreasonable level; notes that despite a meeting taking place on the 27th of March 2019 between HMRC and REBTL, eligible employees that include local residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk have still to receive any payments as HMRC is continuing to hold the funds over the level of tax liability of the beneficiaries; and further notes it is unacceptable that the distribution of funds is being prevented by HMRC notwithstanding a High Court ruling in January 2014 in favour of the Roadchef Employees Benefits Trustees Ltd.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges HMRC to end their foot-dragging and resolve this long-standing issue of the withholding of payments by HMRC to the Roadchef Employees Benefit Trust.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

[P002538]

Cross-border Trade and Accounting

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

6.48 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): It is a pleasure to have secured this Adjournment debate on the exciting topic of accounting systems in cross-border trade. I know the House is racked with anticipation for this debate, as shown by the packed Benches, so I am looking forward to it.

I have to admit that, because of the potential for there being debates on the European Union (Withdrawal Agreement) Bill this week, I thought that cross-border trade would be a hot topic, and that this Adjournment debate would provide an opportunity for colleagues, especially those from Scotland and Northern Ireland, to talk through some of the issues in greater detail. Obviously, events have overtaken us and we are not quite in that situation, so I will continue with the debate but take a slightly different angle. I shall talk about the development of accounting systems, and refer to some of the work by Her Majesty's Revenue and Customs on Making Tax Digital, and about HMRC's support for small and medium-sized businesses. I refer Members to my entry in the Register of Members' Financial Interests.

While on secondment from Marks & Spencer, I had the great fortune to work for the Prince’s Trust’s Accounting for Sustainability project, which is dedicated to using accountants to try to help to solve social and environmental issues. Indeed, His Royal Highness Prince Charles believes that accountants are the key to saving the world: by changing the data that is used in day-to-day business and in organisations, they can help to steer better decision making—

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman) rose—

Luke Graham: Is the Minister on his feet?

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): He is going for a drink.

Luke Graham: I hope it is whisky; we will be here for a while.

Accountants can help us with some of our biggest social and environmental challenges. In the current context, with Brexit on the horizon, I thought this debate would be useful, and later in my speech I shall come to the issues relating to trade between Northern Ireland and Great Britain.

Let me give a little background on accounting systems—the non-accountants in the room can tune in now, because this is the exciting bit. Accounting has come a long way since it was established centuries ago: we had the evolution of double-entry bookkeeping from the original ledgers; we then had some base computing in the 19th century, and then more into the 20th century; and we now have the far more advanced accounting systems that we use today. During my previous life, before I entered the House, I was lucky enough to use a range of different systems, on which I shall touch in just a minute.
One of the Government’s greatest advances in the use of accounting systems to help on the domestic front was the Making Tax Digital scheme. Unfortunately, like many others, I was greatly upset by the fact that the Government had to defer some of their plans to make tax digital because of the advent of Brexit and the consumption of Government time by Brexit preparations. Making tax digital and using accounting systems, whether for small or large businesses, is important because it makes us more efficient and more productive, and it can lead to better decision making for companies right across the United Kingdom. That is vital.

Whether someone is a single trader in Portsmouth, working for the global manager in Edinburgh, or working for a large multinational in London, accounting systems can really give them the transparency of data that they need. They are also environmentally friendly, because as accounting systems develop, we are able to move away from paper receipts and invoices and towards electronic records, which makes interactions between individual companies, customers and suppliers far easier, more efficient and more effective. As a result, the real benefit will be for the entire country, because not only will businesses grow, but it will contribute to our productivity and thus our GDP.

Another important point is that as companies are developing, intangibles and intangible assets are becoming more and more important in their valuation. In fact, just a few years ago it was recognised that around 80% of the value of the S&P 500 is in intangible assets rather than tangible assets. That is why the development of accounting systems is so important: we need to be able not only to capture the value of our physical assets, and use the traditional accounting fair-value methods to make sure that those assets are held at the right value, but to look at new methods of valuing intangibles, because the intangibles of brands and, to a certain extent, intellectual property, along with other new technological advancements, mean that it is increasingly the case that less and less of companies’ value is being captured on our stock exchanges, and that obviously has an impact on the prices that are traded and the returns that can be made by companies and customers throughout the country.

As I said earlier, a number of systems have come into the accounting sphere that can help smaller businesses to improve and be more effective. One of them is Xero and another is QuickBooks, and there is also Oracle for large companies. I should say, for the sake of fairness, that plenty of other accounting systems are available. The point of these systems is to make sure that, from the base transaction and from the base-level accounts receivable and accounts payable systems, right the way up to the highest-level strategic decision making, managers and users of the information have the correct information—the one source of truth—and that there is consistency in the data right the way through the organisation. That is for the benefit not just of the actual company, but of HMRC and our Government. The better the records we receive, the more accurate the accounts are and the more accurately we can calculate the tax take for those companies as well. Obviously, it is always a good thing that companies could tax be low, but companies and individuals pay the taxes that they do indeed owe.

In the current context, as we move between accounting systems, I would like to apply some of this to the discussions that we have been having on Northern Ireland. The reason why I take this leap—some might see it that way—is that many of the accounting systems that are imported now are reconnected to HMRC to help companies and individuals file their tax returns. They are also connected to HMRC for the purpose of VAT filing. As we know with Northern Ireland, VAT and customs have been a key issue in the new withdrawal agreement, and I will explore that a little bit more—hopefully with help from my colleague from Northern Ireland.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for bringing this matter forward. It is a very important initiative. It is just a pity that it is coming at this time, given where we are. Does he understand that these systems, which create a digital border in Northern Ireland and, indeed, in the Republic of Ireland, have been in place since the peace walls came down? That is a fair while ago. Such an approach is, and can be, both sensible and prudent for the region and could be something that happens elsewhere.

Luke Graham: thank my hon. Friend for his intervention. He is quite right. There is a number of those accounting systems, but there is also a number of other systems and structures in place in Northern Ireland. I have to be honest about this. Although I have engaged with some of his colleagues on this over the past two years, many Members in this House and the broader public are still ignorant of the matter. It would, I think, be to the benefit of the House if some of these issues were explored in greater detail and in greater depth, so that Members can make more educated decisions, especially when we are working on such controversial issues as withdrawal from the EU, and as we start mapping out our future trading relationship with Europe. As he will recognise, this will also be important when we have new free trade agreements with other countries around the world—whether they are the rollover agreements that are coming across from the EU or, indeed, new trade agreements such as those with the United States of America. I will touch on that matter in just a moment.

Bob Stewart (Beckenham) (Con): I thank my good friend for allowing me to intervene on him. Let me follow up on the point from the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). Presumably, this digital accounting system will not just be routed into HMRC for tax purposes, but could quite easily be pushed sideways to the Border Force. What we are actually talking about is minimising the paperwork for crossing a border, and that is terribly important.

Luke Graham: My hon. Friend is almost making me skip over certain parts of my speech, so I appreciate his intervention. He is quite right. One of the key systems that is currently used is the VAT information exchange system. Under the current withdrawal agreement proposals, it will still be open to Northern Ireland. At the moment, I am not sure whether it will be open to other parts of the United Kingdom, but I recommend that it should be. Through that system, companies and member states are able to co-ordinate VAT returns. It also enables the simplification of those VAT returns between different member states. There have been concerns about the system, certainly in the area of fraud, especially when parts are moving between different areas of member states, but the system is still a good one and will be open.
to Northern Ireland. That is one of the very good things that is contained within the withdrawal agreement as it stands at the moment.

I did have one question on the issue of VAT. Although VIES will be available to Northern Ireland, as I have said, will it be available to the rest of the UK? Furthermore, one point that I would like someone to explain—it may not be the Financial Secretary to the Treasury today, but certainly I hope that it comes out in further debates—is related to the terms found in the withdrawal agreement when it talks about Northern Ireland being outside EU law in relation to VAT, but also about EU VAT law being applicable in Northern Ireland. Greater transparency in the details around this issue and also in the details around the application of the customs code would help a great deal for debates in this House, which inevitably will take place when, hopefully, we return here in December.

Therefore, as I have said, there are a number of systems available. What is even better is that private business and enterprise are catching up with some of these systems and complementing them. As I mentioned earlier, the evolution of accounting systems that are used by some of these smaller companies and larger companies can then obviously work with systems such as VIES, which means that Government, customers and suppliers can all work together to make sure that there is more efficient and effective record keeping, better tax collection and—hopefully—better revenues and profits for all those involved. As I said, I would love to get some more clarification either from the Treasury Minister himself or from a Brexit Minister in the near future.

This is not just an issue for the United Kingdom and the EU. I had the great fortune to work in China and the United States before I came to this place, and was able to see some of their tax collection and accounting systems in progress. China is an enormous country of over 1 billion people, but a significant amount of accounting records are still kept in paper format—that was back in 2008, so some of the new software was not available then—and everything is signed off by an original chop. For those who do not know, that is a traditional stamp. A record, fapiao or receipt needs a traditional ink chop to be recognised for accounting purposes; multiply that by over 1 billion people, and it becomes more of an issue.

7 pm

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 9(3)).

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

Luke Graham: As a result, I found that we were not able to get the level of transparency and speed of information when we were working right across China—certainly in a multinational company with lots of subsidiaries—as quickly as one would hope in the 21st century, although I know that China is leading the way in many technological advances.

Some of these walls and barriers can also be seen in the United States of America. As many people will know, the United States of America is a federal system. Therefore, companies operating in America often have to file individual city, state and federal tax returns. The US does not have VAT. It has sales tax, which varies as between different parts of the country. This puts an additional burden on individual businesses and increases their costs. It benefits accountants and lawyers, but does not necessarily benefit the revenues and profits of companies. If a company is based in New York, it will have a New York tax return as well as a federal one, and if it has operations in different parts of the United States, it may indeed have to submit sales tax and other taxes in those other states, and then aggregate it all together. That means extra costs and extra burdens.

I hope that the Minister will be able to reassure me that no matter how far we go with devolution in our country, we do not turn to the more federal system whereby we erect more transactional barriers between different parts of the United Kingdom. I do not think businesses, consumers or suppliers want that. We need to ensure that we use accounting systems to make the flow of trade easier, rather than erecting more walls and bureaucracy.

Accounting systems are also incredibly important for cross-border trade because the more open and secure they can be, and the more internationally verifiable they are, the higher levels of trust there will be between customers, suppliers and Governments all around the world. If a Government are entering a new trade agreement with a different country—or indeed the customers and suppliers of that country are engaging in new trade after a new free trade agreement has been signed—having the accounting systems installed and developed means that they have a common way of working. That means that deals can be struck more quickly and sales can be far more profitable.

Let me turn to my ask of the Government. The Conservative and Unionist party has always been the party of business. Brexit has obviously taken an enormous amount of Government time. When Parliament is returned—and I hope that I and my hon. Friends on these Benches will also be returned, as well as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon)—I hope that we will start putting more Government time and effort into progressing systems such as Making Tax Digital, and providing training and incentive programmes to small and large companies so that they invest in their systems. That will mean that they will have more efficient and effective trade, and can make the most of the great trade deals that the Minister is looking to implement when we return to this place and leave the EU.

Better accounting systems would also be great for UK consumer rights, because they provide a greater level of transparency, detail and trust. As I am sure the House will appreciate, in the 21st century trust is an enormous issue for consumers in the United Kingdom and around the world. The greater levels of transparency that companies can provide about their products and ways of operating—whether with regard to tangible assets, intangible assets, sales receipts or the taxes they are paying—the greater the faith that consumers will have in them. I can see my hon. Friend the Member for Stirling (Stephen Kerr) smiling at me. He will have received, as I have, many emails from people complaining about multinationals such as Amazon not paying the right amount of tax. I know that they use efficient accounting systems and I am sure that the Government are working with them to try to make sure that when tax is owed it is paid. Accounting systems can provide that level of transparency to give customers faith that where sales are made, the right level of taxes are paid as well. That is the case both for large and small businesses.
Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I have to say that this is the most passionate speech on accountancy I have ever heard. I am slightly amused by, or in awe of, the idea that accountancy can save the world. To underline my hon. Friend’s point, technology removes operational burdens from business and boosts productivity. Is he going to come on to, or will he comment on, the barriers that are stopping more companies taking up the benefits that he is articulating so very clearly?

Luke Graham: My hon. Friend makes a very good point. The Minister will be well versed in some of the reports and debates on Making Tax Digital. A lot of these barriers were articulated at that time. One key area will be costs. Sometimes the cost of pieces of accounting software is very low, perhaps a couple of hundred pounds or so, but for a small company it is still an additional cost. The other obstacle that customers and companies will face is knowledge of the accounting software. Even in a large multinational business, many of the execs on the board, and many of the managers, have no knowledge of their accounting system. They are only focused on simple outputs and do not necessarily know what is underneath the bonnet. With modern cars, as we all know, that often leads to more costly and more complicated servicing when the time comes. That is great news for finance directors but not such great news for operational directors.

Bob Stewart: In the nicest way, I think that my hon. Friend is such a know-all on this subject that he has just talked himself into becoming a junior or even a middle-ranking Brexit Minister after the election.

Luke Graham: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention—I think. As my record will show, I am very much in favour of more international co-operation, and I hope that we will be doing that when we come back.

Accounting systems can really help with cross-border trade, from small companies to large multinationals. As I hope I have laid out in this short speech, they have been used in places such as Northern Ireland, and they can be discussed in some of our debates when, hopefully, we return to this place. It will be useful for the Government to use some of these systems as they negotiate new trade with other countries all around the world. The Government are very fond of saying that they want a key to that global Britain.

I hope I have laid out in this short speech, they have in places such as Northern Ireland, and they can be discussed in some of our debates when, hopefully, we return to this place. It will be useful for the Government to use some of these systems as they negotiate new trade with other countries all around the world. The Government are very fond of saying that they want a key to that global Britain.

Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con): What does my hon. Friend say to people like me who are gravely concerned about the degree of complexity in these accounting systems, which makes any kind of audit trail really difficult? The big four audit companies have such a poor record in auditing these accounting systems. What does he say to people like me who are sceptical about how to drive transparency, which was mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire?

Craig Mackinlay: I would go against that. I think my hon. Friend will find that the digital trail is more likely to be there than the old paper trail. It is rather like my hon. Friend’s tweet from 10 years ago: it is still there, and it will be with him for a lifetime. This gives us an opportunity to have greater audit accountability. I take his point about the big four auditors, but we are talking about volumes of transactions that are mind-blowing, and to ask an auditor—I declare an interest: I am an auditor, and I still hold registration—to be responsible for every jot of every transaction lacks an understanding of what the audit process is all about.

I will return to the point I was making, because I know that the Minister will want to speak for some time. I was talking about the fact that things are not completely frictionless today. If I sell, as a VAT-registered entity in the UK, to another VAT-registered entity, it is not frictionless. That transaction has to be recorded on both sides, and it will find its way through Making Tax Digital on to a VAT return, so the trail is there. If I sell to an EU company, a level of complication comes into play, because I have to obtain an EU registration number, and I can then zero-rate that transaction. On the other side, they have to do a reverse charge to recreate that VAT for themselves and claim it back. It is a burdensome system, whichever way we look at it. Whether or not a business is partially exempt, at the end of the day, the transaction looks the same, but it is not frictionless; it is far from it.

A big trader with transactions of more than £250,000 going out to the EU and more than £1.5 million coming in enters the ambit of the Intrastat system, which is...
quite burdensome. A business has to classify each and every commodity that it is selling abroad, according to an Intrastat classification nomenclature. If one were to look on the UK Trade Info website, they would find that there are literally thousands of lines of code. One really must ask whether this is bureaucracy gone mad. I was looking at the website as I was listening to the very worthwhile speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire. There is a different code for frozen lamb carcases and half carcases from frozen meat of lamb. One wonders why we have such a complex system.

This is all done electronically, and it comes down to trust. When we buy something in a shop, there is not a man from HMRC at the counter making sure that the transaction finds its way on to a VAT return, just as not every single transaction across EU borders is checked. But those records and proof of a good being transferred have to be maintained for six years. Again, this is not a frictionless system.

The issue of trust is very relevant to the Republic-Northern Ireland border. There are massive excise duties across that border. There are different currencies and a different VAT rate. Corporation tax is different, and income tax is different. There are a vast number of different things going on. I always give the example of the Jameson lorry that trundles from the Republic across the border into the north and perhaps then over to GB, and the Bushmills lorry going from Northern Ireland across the border to the south. There is no physical border infrastructure, yet there are hundreds of thousands of pounds of potential differences in the excisable duties. These lorries are never stopped, however, because there is trust, and that is the route to solving this problem.

Many people will say they have concerns about VAT losses across the border. There are such concerns, but again, this is based on trust. I consider that the amount of excise losses even today, during our membership of the European Union, must be of very great interest to the Financial Secretary to the Treasury. Let us just consider the cigarette trade, in which cigarettes come across the border from Poland at £2.50 a packet versus a UK cigarette price of about £10 or more, yet we accept those losses because individuals are allowed to bring in as many of these products as they please. That obviously feeds into a black market, and I can assure the Financial Secretary that those are just the cigarette trade excise losses. We have chosen as a country—for Ochil and South Perthshire mentioned that the US has a federal system. The US is often held up as the land of the free, as it is called, but I do not think that holds very true of Uncle Sam. The level of bureaucracy in running a business in the US is infinitely higher than in running one in the UK. I was quite intrigued to learn that if an individual in California decides to buy goods on eBay or whatever site they please from a low-tax state such as Dakota, they have to do a personal return for a transaction above a certain size monthly or quarterly, and actually return the equivalent of the sales tax—VAT, in other words—that the Californian authorities have lost because they have taken their trade outside California. These things are solvable.

I really wish the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) was still in his place, because I understand the Northern Ireland concerns. As with anything in the profession of accounting or of running a business, when there is change, everybody puts their hands up in the air and says, “We’ll never get to grips with this. I’m retiring. I’m giving up. It’s all too complicated.” That applies to the real-time information for PAYE that we imposed some years ago—there were the same concerns—or auto-enrolment for pensions, but we get on with it.

Luke Graham: My hon. Friend is making a very strong point about taxation returns and the problems in Northern Ireland. Does he agree with me that some of the simplest solutions can be the best? Some of the best tax regimes are in places such as Hong Kong where there are flat taxes, which are simple and elegant. He talked about some of the complications in the US, which has a tax code that runs to some 75,000 pages, so it is said, whereas the UK’s had about 17,000 pages in 2015.

Craig Mackinlay: That is a topic for a wider debate, which I have often considered. The UK tax code does not have 17,000 pages; it has been rather well expanded to 22,000 pages. When we compare that with the tax code of Hong Kong, which runs to 350 pages, we can see the difference. When I was a councillor on Medway Council, we had a document on the localisation of council tax that ran to 370 pages. I wondered how on earth the entire tax code of a very successful and vibrant economy such as Hong Kong could run to 350 pages, yet Medway Council, which I served on, managed to get a 370 page document just to consider the localisation of council tax.

I know the Minister will want me to conclude, Madam Deputy Speaker, and I do not want to take up any more of his time, but the fact is that these things can be solved through the trust that exists today and the digital returns that exist today, including internationally. The concerns that our friends in the Democratic Unionist party have about a future trading bureaucracy are real, but once this is in operation, they will fade away, and people will get used to the new system within a very short time. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire for bringing forward this debate, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister.

7.19 pm

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): I feel almost embarrassed to be intervening on the promising discussion between my hon. Friends the Members for Ochil and South Perthshire (Luke Graham) and for South Thanet (Craig Mackinlay); it is almost as though one would be intruding by saying anything from the Treasury Bench, given the degree of conversation that was going on. I thank them both for a most engrossing and expert discussion.

When I was thinking about this debate, I did a little research into the background of my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire and discovered
that part of his life had been spent not merely as an accountant at Tesco and Marks and Spencer, where he started to develop the considerable personal knowledge he has demonstrated, but involved an outfit called Tough Mudder. I do not know whether you have come across Tough Mudder, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is an organisation that specialises in ultra-long obstacle courses of 8 to 10 miles, or possibly longer. It holds some rather interesting events. I bring your attention to the “arctic enema” in which participants plunge into a dumpster filled with ice water, dunk themselves underneath the plank that crosses the dumpster and then pull themselves out on the other side. There is also “electroshock therapy” in which live wires hang over a field of mud that participants must traverse. Above all—this is especially important in the context of the House of Commons—there is “Everest” in which participants run up a quarter pipe slicked with mud and grease; just the thing to ascend the ladder of career opportunity in Government and Parliament. It does not surprise me at all that my hon. Friend should have acquired those important skills; he is demonstrating them so brilliantly in his parliamentary career.

It is also quite interesting how my hon. Friend has deployed precisely those Tough Mudder tactics so successfully today in calling for an Adjournment debate on cross-border trade and accounting systems and then taking us into the highways and byways of the tax code. I call that classic bait-and-switch of the kind that the founders of Tough Mudder would be delighted with.

Let me mention a few of the things we have touched on before coming to the main thrust of the topic. My hon. Friend is absolutely right to highlight Making Tax Digital for VAT, not merely as a success for HMRC—although it has had some delay, it is clearly proving to be that in relation to VAT—but because of its wider effects. More than 1.25 million businesses are signed up to Making Tax Digital for business, and very nearly 1.75 million VAT returns have been successfully submitted through the service. Some 81% of all businesses mandated from April are now signed up to it. That is a tremendous achievement, and it fully bears out the point made by my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet. When the British people are presented with a challenge, particularly on taxation, they rise to it and overcome it. That is an important and valuable characteristic, and it is one we rely on.

There are also wider benefits, and they are becoming quite evident. There are potentially quite significant productivity benefits—we are still measuring them in HMRC. The benefits are starting to be made sufficiently well known within the smaller business community to result in many signing up for Making Tax Digital VAT voluntarily; they are not captured by its mandate because they are not above the threshold. That is an important aspect of the wider picture of improving productivity and audit and accountability that goes with these developed processes.

My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire also rightly mentioned the concerns and opportunities created by new methods of managing and valuing intangibles. That is always of great interest to Revenue and Customs, as he might imagine. He talks about the importance of transactional barriers and the need to avoid them; of course, I agree. He rightly focused on extracting an appropriate level of tax from the very largest companies and platforms—he and I have written about this in other contexts. It is important to level the playing field, with platforms using their power for good rather than yielding to the temptation to exploit insider information and one-to-many power to create an unlevel playing field. In part, that is exactly what our digital services tax is designed to do.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet quite rightly mentions cigarette excise losses. If it is of any reassurance to him, I personally have sat with the HMRC fraud team tracking of some of these gangs in real time. I can tell him that it is an enormously impressive operation and one that yields great benefits to the Revenue and to this country’s Exchequer.

Turning to the issue at hand, let me say a few things about the very important question that my hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire asked about cross-border trade and the role that accounting systems can play in that. He will be aware that the Government are committed to an efficient and effective customs system that minimises administrative burdens on people who trade. He will also know that HMRC has invested some £34 million to fund training for individual businesses and—the key point—to develop and grow the customs intermediary sector so that it embeds greater expertise and institutional capacity to sustain our customs over the longer term. Indeed, I spoke at the launch of the UK Customs Academy, funded by HMRC, only last month.

It is also important, as my hon. Friend has stressed, to make customs processes as simple as possible. The current declaration system, known as CHIEF, as my hon. Friend the Member for South Thanet mentioned, is being replaced with a new customs declaration service that is much more modern, much more flexible and able to anticipate vastly larger volumes of trade, and much easier and quicker for traders to use. The digital and streamlined processes committed to in the 2018 Budget are already coming into play and the specific commitment to halve the time it takes to receive authorised economic operator status is a further exemplification of that.

Let me come, slightly more widely, to the question of VAT. My hon. Friend the Member for Ochil and South Perthshire is right to ask whether VAT systems can be used to facilitate cross-border trade. This is an issue that officials within HMRC have explored in relation to HMRC’s own VAT regime and whether that can be deployed to facilitate customs processes. The House should be clear that there are specific challenges arising from that. The first has to do with the monitoring of goods, and the UK is under an obligation to demonstrate its control over goods imported and exported from this country. The Government need to be able to monitor the movement of goods in real time, but the trouble is the current VAT system, which is of course typically run on a quarterly returns basis and does not meet the real-time requirement, as VAT is accountable after the movement of goods.

The second challenge is a related one and bears on assurance. It is an underlying principle of the World Trade Organisation and the World Customs Organisation that tariffs should exist as a trade policy tool and must be applied in a fair and reasonable way. Real-time controls are a way of satisfying authorities that the correct tariff has been applied and collected on goods and, of course, it is important not to lose the credibility
that border controls confer when they are deployed on the UK as a trading partner. That would potentially be put at risk by this suggestion.

Real-time controls of course also help to ensure that goods that do not comply with regulatory standards or that pose a security risk—of course there are such goods—do not enter this country. Without some customs processes, it would be difficult to identify and check goods that pose a risk to this country. It could be a phytosanitary risk, one from hazardous materials or, of course, one from weapons and other things of that nature.

The final challenge I would identify is that we are under an obligation to show that we have applied trade policy in a fair and uniform manner, and customs controls allow us to differentiate countries that have free trade agreements from those that are subject to most favoured nation status. Of course, any future customs facilitation for UK-EU trade will be a matter for negotiation once we have left the EU. Both we and the EU envisage putting in place ambitious customs arrangements to make use of all the available facilitative arrangements and technologies that we can.

Let me reassure you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and colleagues across the Chamber that we are preparing for that negotiation and will work with Parliament, the devolved Administrations and others to ensure a successful outcome in the interests of all parts of the United Kingdom.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Thank you. What an interesting debate. It’s all right—I am a lawyer, so I understand accountants.

Question put and agreed to.

7.30 pm

House adjourned.
Wildlife Crime

1. Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): What plans has the Department to tackle wildlife crime.

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Zac Goldsmith): This is the last time I will be able to address you from the Chamber, Mr Speaker, so I would like to put on record my thanks to you for what you have done for this House, particularly during my time as a Back Bencher, when we worked closely on a number of issues. I thank you very much what you have done.

The UK is a world leader in efforts to protect endangered plants and animals from poaching and illegal wildlife trade. We have invested over £36 million between 2014 and 2021 on work to directly counter the illegal wildlife trade, including reducing demand, strengthening enforcement, ensuring effective legal frameworks and developing sustainable livelihoods. We will significantly scale up our funding from 2021 by doubling the illegal wildlife trade challenge fund as part of the £220 million international biodiversity fund announced in September.

Andrew Jones: I am concerned, along with many constituents who have contacted me on this issue, that the persecution of raptors is not treated as a priority by local police forces. Can my right hon. Friend confirm that raptor persecution, particularly that of hen harriers, is a national wildlife crime priority and that strong penalties are in place for offences committed against birds of prey?

Zac Goldsmith: The illegal wildlife trade is not just an international issue; it is a domestic issue as well. All our birds in the UK are protected. Wild birds are protected under the Wildlife and Countryside Act 1981 and there are strong penalties for committing offences. The Government take wildlife crime very seriously and have identified raptor persecution as a national wildlife crime priority, and that includes species such as hen harriers and peregrines of course. We are very concerned, however, about hen harrier populations, which is why we took the lead on the hen harrier action plan to increase hen harrier populations in England. I add that DEFRA has committed to at least maintaining existing levels of funding for the national wildlife fund until the next spending review.

Nick Smith (Blaenau Gwent) (Lab): A constituent of mine has been terrorised by off-road bikers, who are also devastating local wildlife. Because this is happening on private land, our local police have found it difficult to take action, so will the Department and the police work together to overcome this dreadful problem?

Zac Goldsmith: I have had letters from the constituents of a number of hon. Members raising the same issue: off-road bikers causing wildlife mayhem in sensitive and fragile parts of the countryside. I of course commit to the hon. Gentleman to talk to the police and landowners and animal welfare charities to see what the best solution is. There is no silver bullet to solve the problem. It needs to be addressed, but it is not immediately obvious what that solution would be.

Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): Canned lion hunting in South Africa is causing terrible angst for many people because these lions, barely two years old, are shot at point-blank range. That adds to the trophy hunting imports to this country. When is the consultation my right hon. Friend mentioned going to begin?

Zac Goldsmith: My hon. Friend is right: canned lion hunting is one of the grimmest of all human activities. It is hard to see any defence for it. There are concerns that, although it may not be a direct conservation issue, creating a legal trade in lion parts, particularly lion bones, provides a cover for the illegal trade, and we know that lion numbers have plummeted in the last 15 or 20 years. As she mentioned, we have committed to launching a call for evidence and, based on the results we get, we will take whatever steps are necessary to end or to regulate the import of hunting trophies.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I commend the Minister for all he has done to stop imports from trophy hunting, but with special reference to that can he outline recent steps taken to absolutely ban any such imports? I think it is the mood of the House and the country for that to happen. Can he tell us what has been done?

Zac Goldsmith: The hon. Gentleman knows my views on the issue; we have discussed it many times. From the Back Benches and as a Minister, I have debated the issue with him, although we have been on the same side of the debate. I am appalled by the very concept of wanting to shoot these extraordinarily beautiful, endangered wild animals. I cannot see any obvious link between that activity and protection of those animals. However, we are obliged as a Government, before embarking on any kind of legislation to prevent the import of trophies, to consult so that we know exactly what the impacts of that potential legislative change would be. So we have to do that consultation. We have to do it in an honest fashion. On the back of that consultation, we will take whatever steps are necessary, but I can assure the hon. Gentleman that this is not an issue that we intend to kick into the long grass.
Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: May I just say that I am not ignoring the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith)? I am conscious that she has Question 6, on which another party wishes to come in, so it would perhaps be better for her to wait until then. We look forward to hearing from her in a few minutes.

Sue Hayman (Workington) (Lab): I wish you all the best for the future, Mr Speaker, and thank you for chairing DEFRA questions with such patience and consideration over the last few years.

We know that there are loopholes in the Hunting Act 2004 which are being exploited. A Labour Government would strengthen the hunting ban, so may I ask what the Conservative Government have been doing to stop foxhunters from breaking the law?

Zac Goldsmith: There is no doubt that illegal activities continue. They are well documented and often secure widespread coverage on social media in particular, and they cause outrage among the population. Those activities are already illegal: they are against the law. Digging up setts, bashing fox cubs on the head and breeding foxes to feed to hounds are illegal as well as abhorrent. The challenge relates to enforcement and prosecution. As I mentioned, we are committed to maintaining levels of funding for the National Wildlife Crime Unit, and we are encouraging other Government Departments to play their part as well.

Animal Cruelty

2. Mike Wood (Dudley South) (Con): What steps she is taking to prevent animal cruelty. [900244]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Theresa Villiers): May I join others, Mr Speaker, in thanking you and your chaplain for your service to the House? You have been particularly kind in enabling me to raise from the Back Benches many issues that really matter to my constituents, and I am profoundly grateful.

The Government have introduced a range of measures to improve animal welfare, including a rigorous ban on the ivory trade and mandatory CCTV in all slaughterhouses. We are considering proposals to tighten the welfare rules for animals in transit, including a ban on unnecessary and excessively long journeys to slaughter.

Mike Wood: A year ago, a Dudley magistrates court convicted a teenager of abducting, torturing and killing a pet cat. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to protect the welfare of all cats?

Theresa Villiers: We will be pressing ahead with the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill so that horrific crimes like that can meet with the appropriate punishment. We are consulting on compulsory microchipping for cats to ensure that lost pets can be reunited with their owners, and we have also banned third party sales of kittens and puppies.

Christian Matheson (City of Chester) (Lab): One way of preventing animal cruelty would be to tighten the law on illegal foxhunting. Will Ministers undertake to introduce a system of monitoring before the foxhunting season starts in order to find out just how many illegal killings are taking place, so that we know how to address the problem?

Theresa Villiers: As my right hon. Friend the Minister of State has said, we believe that it is crucial for all our laws to be properly enforced, including the Hunting Act, and we will continue to engage with the appropriate authorities to ensure that that is the case.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: It is a great pleasure to call Dame Caroline Spelman. I am very sorry that the right hon. Lady is leaving the House. I know that she will be performing in her own right later, but she will be greatly missed by Members in all parts of the House.

Dame Caroline Spelman (Meriden) (Con): That is very kind of you, Mr Speaker. I will save my tribute for the right time, in due course.

Unfortunately, as colleagues with rural constituencies may know, at this time of the year there is a steep rise in the number of abandoned horses as winter approaches. A couple of weeks ago I personally dealt with four abandoned ponies, including two foals barely weaned at 12 weeks. They were in a terrible condition: their feet had never been trimmed, their ribs were showing, and they had lice and mites. I had to get them rehomed.

I welcome the Government’s proposals to take a tougher line with those who abuse animals in this way, but can my right hon. Friend reassure me—gently, given the problem with her voice today—that the Government will support the police and local authorities in taking action and enforcing the law on these criminals?

Theresa Villiers: I can of course give my right hon. Friend that assurance. This is a worrying problem, and we are keen to engage with the charities that are involved in trying to address the issue. I wish her well in her retirement and thank her for that question.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): There is cross-party support for increasing prison sentences for those who hurt and cruelly kill animals, but Ministers have dithered and delayed over the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill. Even in this divided Parliament, and even at this late stage, there is still a chance to get that Bill on the statute book before the election. Labour backs the Bill, the Secretary of State’s own Back Benchers back the Bill and the public back the Bill, so will she give a commitment that she will use every effort to get it on the statute book before the general election is called?

Theresa Villiers: I can give the hon. Gentleman the assurance that, when a Conservative Government are returned to serve in this House, the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill will be back on the agenda and we will get it on the statute book.

Air Pollution

3. Ruth Cadbury (Brentford and Isleworth) (Lab): What recent steps she has taken to support local authorities in reducing air pollution. [900245]
Air quality targets are included in the Bill, but we already have an ambition in the clear air strategy. Reaching the target for particulate matter 2.5 is an absolute priority, but the actual target will be set in secondary legislation after expert advice has been taken on exactly how to do that. I met one of the heads of the WHO just last week, and she agreed that that is the right way of doing things, because this is tricky, and we must get it right.

Rebecca Pow: Air quality targets are included in the Bill, but we already have an ambition in the clear air strategy. Reaching the target for particulate matter 2.5 is an absolute priority, but the actual target will be set in secondary legislation after expert advice has been taken on exactly how to do that. I met one of the heads of the WHO just last week, and she agreed that that is the right way of doing things, because this is tricky, and we must get it right.

Rebecca Pow: Tackling air quality is closely linked to what happens in the planning system, particularly when it comes to housing. Officials in the two Departments have recently collaborated on developing planning guidance. I recently wrote to Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government Ministers to urge much closer collaboration on, for example, housing and housing design, because all the emissions from housing affect climate change. This is all about cross-working.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Parts of Chatham suffer from high levels of air pollution. Medway Council is doing what it can to tackle it, but I am working with a school that sits right on a very busy road to develop a green wall to reduce some of the air pollution specifically for children. What work is the Minister doing with the Department for Education to support schools to provide their own green solutions to tackle air pollution?

Rebecca Pow: That question is of great interest to me as a former horticultural journalist. Green walls are a great thing. Not only do they look great, but they help by taking in carbon emissions and so on. DEFRA has an air quality grant programme that can help local authorities to fund projects to tackle air pollution in specific areas like schools, so that school could ask for support under the programme. Good question.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: On my last day in the Chair, it gives me particular pleasure again to call—Bambos Charalambous!

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): One of the things that I will certainly miss when you are not in the Chair is how you pronounce my name, Mr Speaker. Thank you so much. Why does the Environment Bill not include World Health Organisation targets for air pollutants or set clear targets to meet them?

Rebecca Pow: Air quality targets are included in the Bill, but we already have an ambition in the clear air strategy. Reaching the target for particulate matter 2.5 is an absolute priority, but the actual target will be set in secondary legislation after expert advice has been taken on exactly how to do that. I met one of the heads of the WHO just last week, and she agreed that that is the right way of doing things, because this is tricky, and we must get it right.

Plastic Pollution

4. Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): What steps she is taking to tackle plastic pollution.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Theresa Villiers): To tackle plastic pollution, we have introduced a world-leading microbeads ban, reduced single-use plastic bag usage by 90% in the main supermarkets, and launched the Commonwealth Clean
expressed in the House today about plastics. Crucial if we are to address the concerns that have been raised. I fully agree that technology is going to be the key to solving the problem. Is it possible for the Government to set targets to get us back to those low levels? Recycling just delays the amount of plastic going into the environment.

There are 5,000 items of marine plastic pollution per mile of beach in the UK. The amount of plastic produced globally has increased from 1.5 million tonnes in 1950 to 320 million tonnes a couple of years ago. It is clear that we need to produce less plastic, not more, so will my right hon. Friend explain what we are doing to ensure that as much plastic is recycled as possible and that that happens here in the UK? Plastic should not be shipped overseas for other people to deal with.

Nik Spencer has invented an incredible, groundbreaking piece of technology that would eliminate the need for plastic waste entirely if it is commercially adopted, because it converts plastic waste in the home into energy? Is my right hon. Friend aware that my constituent Woolsrich, who founded Stafford Litter Heroes, for all that she and her colleagues have done. By this weekend, they will have collected more than 2 tonnes of litter from the area in a very short time. We should pay great tribute to volunteers like them.

There are 5,000 items of marine plastic pollution per mile of beach in the UK. The amount of plastic produced globally has increased from 1.5 million tonnes in 1950 to 320 million tonnes a couple of years ago. It is clear that we need to produce less plastic, not more, so will my right hon. Friend explain what we are doing to ensure that as much plastic is recycled as possible and that that happens here in the UK? Plastic should not be shipped overseas for other people to deal with.

Theresa Villiers: My hon. Friend is correct: current levels of plastic pollution are intolerable, and the Government are determined to tackle them. We will be introducing a system to incentivise plastic packaging producers to use more recyclable material, but also less material in general. We will be banning plastic stirrers and cotton buds. We are introducing a deposit return scheme on drinks containers. We will also be introducing more consistent recycling to help everyone to recycle more to tackle the terrible problem of plastics pollution.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): Plastic was rare when I was brought up in the 1950s, so is it possible for the Government to set targets to get us back to those low levels? Recycling just delays the amount of plastic going into the environment.

Theresa Villiers: Our Environment Bill provides the opportunity for future Governments to set targets on the use of resources and recycling. Reducing the need for single-use plastics is an important part of this, but recycling will also be a crucial part in reaching our goal of eliminating avoidable plastic waste in the coming years. That is why we are seeking to increase the amount of plastic that is recyclable and is recycled.

Rachel Maclean (Redditch) (Con): May I, too, wish you all the best, Mr Speaker? May I also thank you for teaching me the value of patience and for helping me have considerable exercise for my knees during my time in this Chamber?

Is my right hon. Friend aware that my constituent Nik Spencer has invented an incredible, groundbreaking piece of technology that would eliminate the need for plastic waste entirely if it is commercially adopted, because it converts plastic waste in the home into energy? If, as I very much hope, we are returned to government, will she agree to meet me to see how we can stimulate and incentivise technologies such as this machine, so that we can tackle plastic pollution at its source?

Theresa Villiers: Yes, I can give my hon. Friend that assurance. I fully agree that technology is going to be crucial if we are to address the concerns that have been expressed in the House today about plastics.

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for making me feel welcome in the short time I have been here so far.

After “The Blue Planet” and other television programmes, after the in-depth investigations by Friends of the Earth and others, after the mass campaigning by schoolchildren all over the world to prevent plastics in our oceans and after the verdict against a major British company for exporting unsorted waste, can the Secretary of State explain to me why there was nothing in the Environment Bill to tackle waste once it has left this country or to ensure that material collected in good faith for recycling is actually recycled?

Theresa Villiers: The Government are absolutely determined to crack down on any unlawful waste exports and to ensure that waste that is exported is dealt with appropriately. I wish to emphasise that this Government are doing more or less more than any other Government in the world on this, including by making real progress in ensuring that we protect 4 million sq km of the world’s oceans by the end of next year.

Air Quality

5. Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): What recent steps her Department has taken to improve air quality.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): Our clean air strategy sets out an ambitious programme of action to reduce air pollutant emissions from a wide range of sources. The World Health Organisation has recognised the strategy as an example for the rest of the world to follow. We have also put in place a £3.5 billion plan to tackle roadside nitrogen dioxide concentrations, and our Environment Bill makes a clear commitment to set a legally binding target to reduce fine particulate matter.

Tim Loughton: May I echo the tributes being made to your chairmanship, Mr Speaker, although I did not get the memo about sending a bottle to your office as part of it?

I very much welcome the inclusion of air quality provisions in the Environment Bill. May I urge the Minister to look at some of the technological solutions, including one from a company in my constituency which is producing paints and coverings that neutralise nitrogen oxide emissions, not just absorb them? May I also ask her to look at the issue of air quality monitoring, because it turns out that several bits of air quality monitoring equipment in my constituency have not been working for some time? Although we have obligations on local authorities to reduce air pollution, we do not appear to have similar requirements on them to make sure they are monitoring it properly and accurately, and that needs to be looked at.

Rebecca Pow: I thank my hon. Friend for raising these important points. Officials would be pleased to hear about any technologies, because the use of innovation and tech is absolutely the way we are going to solve lots of these problems. So I would be grateful if he would like to feed them in so that I can pass them on. Monitoring is also key, and it is all about science and data, which are very important. Our landmark Environment Bill requires us to set legally binding targets on this fine particulate...
matter, which is what authorities are mostly monitoring, as well as nitrogen dioxide, and to have separate long-term air quality targets to improve air quality nationwide. So we are moving in the right direction.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): We are hearing commitments and good words from the Government but we are seeing very little action. They have been lackadaisical when it comes to the breaking of legal limits on air pollution, including at 50 sites across London. The Mayor of London has taken effective action, through the ultra low emission zone, and has taken practical steps to reduce air pollution. Is it not time we saw the same sort of determination from the Government?

Rebecca Pow: A great deal of action is taking place: local authorities have a duty to tackle air pollution and this year clean-air zones are coming into major cities right across the nation. The Department is working closely with others on the introduction of those zones, about which the House will hear more shortly.

Office for Environmental Protection

6. Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (LD): What plans she has to ensure the (a) transparency and (b) accountability of the proposed Office for Environmental Protection. [900249]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Theresa Villiers): Clause 20(2) of the Environment Bill places a duty on the Office for Environmental Protection to “have regard to the need to act...transparently.” It must publish key documents, such as its strategy, annual report and accounts, and lay them before Parliament.

Angela Smith: The concept of the OEP has been touted by the Government as an independent watchdog, yet it will be funded by the Government and its chair will be appointed by the Government. Surely the Secretary of State will agree that at the very least the relevant Select Committee should play a key role in the appointment of the chair and the non-executive members of the board.

Theresa Villiers: I assure the hon. Lady that the Environment, Food and Rural Affairs Committee and the Environmental Audit Committee will play a key role in the pre-appointment scrutiny of the OEP chairman. I also assure her that the OEP will have a multi-year funding settlement and that Ministers will be required to safeguard its independence. In many ways, the departmental structure will be broadly similar to the Equality and Human Rights Commission, which has clearly demonstrated its total independence from the Government. I am sure we will see that same determination from this powerful new environmental watchdog.

Deidre Brock (Edinburgh North and Leith) (SNP): I was very sorry to have to miss your visit to the SNP group the other day, Mr Speaker. I shall take this opportunity to thank you for everything you have done—for your doughty defence of democracy and particularly your support for lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights and for Back Benchers’ interests. I wish you and your beautiful family all the very best for the years ahead. May I also commend the two gentlemen to your left—stage left, as we used to say—Mr Peter Barratt and Mr Ian Davis, who I know have offered you such valuable support over years?

Let me begin my question by saying happy non-Brexit day to the Government Front-Bench team. Will the Secretary of State tell us whether the Scottish Government support the proposals on the OEP? Were they consulted on them?

Theresa Villiers: There was extensive work between the UK Government and the Scottish Government on the Environment Bill, including the clauses on the OEP. We are grateful that, as a result of that work, large elements of the Bill will apply in Scotland. I understand that the Scottish Government intend, I hope, to create a body that is broadly similar to the OEP, to manage the scrutiny of environmental matters where they are devolved in Scotland.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): May I join the tributes to you, Mr Speaker? I thank you for your comradeship in opposition, when you were a spokesman with me in various Departments, and for your encouragement in respect of the Animal Welfare (Service Animals) Act 2019—[HOn. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] Thank you.

Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): Say, “Question 7.”

Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill

7. Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): What discussions she has had with Cabinet colleagues on the timeframe for the passage of the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill. [900250]

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Theresa Villiers): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on steering Finn’s law through Parliament. The Government remain absolutely committed to tougher sentences for animal cruelty offences, and we intend to bring the Bill back to the House as soon as possible.

Sir Oliver Heald: Thank you for my second go, Mr Speaker.

My right hon. Friend will know that the supporters of the Animal Welfare (Service Animals) Act 2019 were also keen to improve the maximum sentences and to see them go up. Can she confirm that that will be a top priority for any incoming Conservative Government?

Theresa Villiers: Yes, I can.

Mr Speaker: It brings me further great pleasure, on my last day in the Chair, to call again Thangam Debbonaire.

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): Oh Mr Speaker, I do not know what to say. I am going to miss this. Thank you for everything you have done for Back Benchers.

The Secretary of State says that the Animal Welfare (Sentencing) Bill is going to come back to the House as soon as possible; that could be Monday. There is cross-party agreement on this short Bill, and as the Labour DEFRA Whip I have the permission of our shadow Secretary of
State to say that we support the Bill, we could crack on, and it could be done and on the statute book before Dissolution. Even at this late stage, why will she not put it on the Order Paper for Monday or Tuesday?

Theresa Villiers: I can reassure the hon. Lady that a Conservative Government will put this Bill on the Order Paper very soon after we are re-elected to serve this country.

Waste Crime

8. Craig Tracey (North Warwickshire) (Con): What plans her Department has to tackle waste crime.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Theresa Villiers): Waste crime blights local communities and the environment, and we are committed to tackling it. We have given the Environment Agency £60 million extra to tackle waste crime since 2014. The Environment Bill takes forward a number of commitments on preventing, detecting and deterring waste crime.

Craig Tracey: Fly-tipping is a scourge in many communities across North Warwickshire and Bedworth, and it costs councils and local landowners hundreds of thousands of pounds to clear up, but it is often unwittingly facilitated by householders failing to ask whether a valid waste licence is in place. What steps can householders take to check that there is a valid licence, so that they do not unwittingly become the recipient of a fine themselves?

Theresa Villiers: Householders can check using the carrier’s business name or registration number, which the carrier should be able to give them on request, and they have the opportunity to check those against the details on the Environment Agency website, or by ringing the Environment Agency helpline.

Nic Dakin (Scunthorpe) (Lab): I would like to say, Mr Speaker, what a pleasure it has been to serve under your speakership during my time in Parliament.

Recently, I went out with members of the National Farmers’ Union in my constituency and was horrified to discover a spate of fly-tipping of very dubious materials that then need to be checked by the landowner. The landowner has a responsibility to check out the hazardous nature of the materials and then to dispose of them safely. This is putting much additional pressure on farmers and rural communities. What can the Government do to support those rural communities and the police forces who continue to be under significant pressure to address this spate of fly-tipping?

Theresa Villiers: I share the hon. Gentleman’s concerns. Fly-tipping is completely unacceptable, and it is blighting life in rural areas, in suburban areas, such as my constituency, and in urban areas. One thing the Environment Bill will do is facilitate the introduction of electronic waste-tracking, which should assist the law enforcement authorities to crack down on this unacceptable crime.

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): One of your predecessors, Mr Speaker, congratulated me on always addressing the Chair. If I may say so, it has been my particular privilege to address the Chair when you are in it, and, if I may also say so, those who stand beside it have always gone to extraordinary lengths to be helpful.

The New Forest is being desecrated by people fly-tipping. Will my right hon. Friend have a word with her colleagues in the Ministry of Justice to ensure that we are more robust with respect to punishments—perhaps garrotting perpetrators with their own intestines?

Theresa Villiers: I am not sure that I could go quite that far. Certainly, in providing extra resources for the Environment Agency, we are absolutely determined to crack down on this deeply antisocial crime. I hope the courts will view it seriously and inflict appropriate punishment.

Mr Speaker: I thank the right hon. Gentleman. The word “imitable” could have been invented to describe him, and that is supposed to be the warmest compliment. I genuinely appreciate what he said.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): May I join others in expressing the hope that no circumlocutory measures will be put in place to try to restrict your perorations post your retirement, during the next stage in your career?

May I ask the Minister to liaise with the Northern Ireland authorities to ensure that action is taken on the huge waste dump at Mobuoy, outside Londonderry, to ensure that restrictions are put in place and that we pursue those responsible?

Theresa Villiers: I am happy to engage with the Northern Ireland authorities on that important question.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: We are running late, but, of course, the Chair has the benefit of Kantian perfect information. That is to say that I know how many people have or have not applied to speak in subsequent business, and subsequent business is not especially heavily subscribed. My priority is to try to accommodate, within reason, Back Benchers.

Chalk Streams

9. Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): What steps she is taking to protect chalk streams.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): This Government are committed to taking action to protect and enhance the water environment, including our valuable chalk streams. Chalk streams are under particular pressure at the moment due to low groundwater levels following two dry winters. We are working closely with partners to reform and reduce the volume of abstraction, deliver catchment sensitive farming, reduce pollution and plan future environmental resilience.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: Today is a sad day for Buckinghamshire. Mr Speaker, because we are going to lose you as the Member for Buckingham. Before I ask my question of the Minister, may I just say that you have been a superb colleague to sit alongside? I am going to miss you particularly because you will not be there to join me in championing the Chilterns, but you have consistently stood by my side when opposing HS2,
and you are to be congratulated on what you have done on autism. As I press for the Chilterns area of outstanding natural beauty to become a national park, I do hope that, even though you will have left this place, you will still stand by my side and support that proposal.

Mr Speaker: I will.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: Thank you.

The Chess and the Misbourne are ecologically vulnerable chalk streams in my constituency, and there are several in the Chilterns that are under threat. HS2 Ltd has now said that it requires 8 million litres of water a day for two years in order to build phase 1 of HS2. That means that we could face over-abstraction again, and could see these streams irreparably damaged or destroyed altogether. Will Ministers really take this on board and work with the Department for Transport to get HS2 cancelled—and, if not, to protect these absolutely precious pieces of our environment for our future generations?

Rebecca Pow: Chalk streams are some of our most precious environments, so this is a serious issue. The Environment Agency is advising HS2 Ltd and its contractors on mitigating the potential impact of its work on water levels and the quality of chalk streams, including when it comes to water usage for tunnelling in the Chilterns. The Environment Agency will be reviewing any application for increased abstraction in line with the relevant abstraction management strategy to ensure that there is no detrimental effect on chalk streams. I take this matter very seriously and would be happy to meet my right hon. Friend to discuss this further because chalk streams are so important and it is important that we get this right.

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): Mr Speaker, thank you for turning the pronunciation of challenging surnames into an art form in itself—although I have to say that my campaign to be called in reverse alphabetical order continues.

The River Cam is fed by chalk streams. In July this year, it fell to a third of its normal level, which has caused huge concern not just in Cambridge, but in the surrounding county. This has happened largely due to over-abstraction. What can the Minister to do to assure surrounding county. This has happened largely due to over-abstraction. What can the Minister to do to assure surrounding county. This has happened largely due to over-abstraction. What can the Minister to do to assure surrounding county. This has happened largely due to over-abstraction. What can the Minister to do to assure surrounding county. This has happened largely due to over-abstraction. What can the Minister to do to assure surrounding county. This has happened largely due to over-abstraction. What can the Minister to do to assure surrounding county. This has happened largely due to over-abstraction. What can the Minister to do to assure surrou

Rebecca Pow: The issue with chalk streams, of course, is that they are fed by groundwater from aquifers; they are very special areas of water extraction. There is going to be a section in the Environment Bill on abstraction licences. I hope that when that gets going and we have proper discussions about that Bill, it will include some ameliorations for chalk streams.

Topical Questions

T1. [900262] Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): If she will make a statement on her departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Theresa Villiers): Since the last EFRA oral questions, the Government have: introduced a major Environment Bill; committed to plant 1 million trees in Northumberland; pledged £11.6 billion for climate measures abroad; published proposals to restrict the import of hunting trophies from endangered animals; banned the sale of primates as pets; and introduced cat microchipping. We have made clear our determination to improve the welfare of live animals transported, with a view to choking off live exports for slaughter or fattening. I have also had the chance to make visits around England, Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland to talk to farmers, fishermen and those involved in the food sector.

Liz Twist: May I join colleagues in thanking you for your help, Mr Speaker? I am going to once again try to avoid your eye while I ask what should be a very short question.

Blaydon Quarry landfill site in my constituency causes a huge nuisance for the communities surrounding it, particularly from the regular bad smells, as residents tell me there are at the moment. I think it is time for the site to be closed—safely. Will the Secretary of State join me in that call and put an end to the absolute misery caused to local residents by this landfill site?

Theresa Villiers: It is worrying to hear the reports of the odour from the site. I understand that an odour suppression system has now been installed in the waste tipping bay and that further engineering works are under way to try to tackle the problem. I can assure the hon. Lady that the Environment Agency continues to take this issue very seriously and is working with the community and the local authority. Earlier this year, it took regulatory action preventing the site from accepting waste until remedial work has been undertaken.

T3. [900264] Gillian Keegan (Chichester) (Con): May I add my personal words, Mr Speaker? Thank you for your friendship, your support and your guidance to all new Members as you have helped us to navigate our way through what, at times, feels like a very turbulent Parliament. From my family to yours, I look forward to seeing much more of you in your retirement. It has been a pleasure to serve with you for a couple of years.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady is an excellent godparent.

Gillian Keegan: Thank you very much, too, to Oliver and Freddie. I look forward to seeing very much more of you.

Pagham Harbour in my constituency is one of the best places to see wildlife in the UK, covering 600 hectares of salt marshes, mudflats, reed beds and lagoons. It is an important natural store of carbon and it absorbs up to 310 tonnes per hectare. What steps is my right hon. Friend taking to ensure that carbon-rich natural habitats are protected to improve biodiversity and help us to reach net zero by 2050?

Theresa Villiers: Protecting nature is a key part of the Environment Bill. It supports the nature recovery network envisaged by our 25-year environment plan. I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for the work that she has done in relation to this wonderful site. She is right to say that nature-based solutions, with natural storage of carbon in such locations, will form a key part of becoming a net-zero economy.

T2. [900263] Mr Alistair Carmichael (Orkney and Shetland) (LD): May I first say, Mr Speaker, that I was one of the early adopters of Bercow for Speaker, as we called the campaign in 2009? Unfortunately, I am part of a much diminished band in that regard now. While I think we would all occasionally have found ourselves wondering
in quiet moments just exactly what we had done, I am also confident in saying that at the end of the day none of us who backed you in 2009 have ever, as parliamentarians, regretted the decision that we took then. I thank you and your family for the service that you have given.

The December Fisheries Council this year will be on the Monday and Tuesday following the general election. There is every indication that it is going to be a challenging negotiation, so what are the Minister and his officials doing now to ensure that the voices of our fishing industries are heard and properly represented at that Council?

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (George Eustice): I thought for a moment that for the first time in six years we might not get on to fisheries and agriculture at DEFRA orals. May I take this opportunity, Mr Speaker, along with others, to thank you for your chairmanship and stewardship of these occasions and wish you well for the future? May I also record a tribute to Reverend Rose, who is also leaving us? She not only presided over my marriage in St Mary Undercroft but baptised my daughter. Many Members have benefited from her pastoral support and advice.

I had a meeting with officials yesterday to discuss the issue of cod and the EU-Norway negotiations. Those negotiations will take place during November. I remain Fisheries Minister during the election period and will continue to monitor events. The right hon. Gentleman is right that the December Fisheries Council that formally adopts these proposals will be about three days after the general election, I hope still to be in place and to go there, but if I am not, I am sure that whoever my successor is will have a steep and enjoyable learning curve in coming to terms with the complexities of the December negotiations.

T4. [900265] Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): Mr Speaker, may I also thank you for your many hours and years of dedication in the Chair? But there is one issue that still has to be resolved, which is the harassment of and threats to female colleagues. I was particularly concerned to hear that a female candidate has already received a death threat this week. Could you use your last few hours and days in this position to urgently look at what more we can do to ensure that everybody is kept safe at this election? No one should be discouraged from standing because of their sex, their race or any other reason.

It is a great honour to be in this place. One of the things that I have most enjoyed doing is cajoling so many colleagues to take part in the “give up plastic for Lent” challenge, which opened our eyes to the fact that we need action by Government and across society to deal with the scourge of plastic waste. Does my right hon. Friend agree that the Environment Bill is a step change in how we deal with plastics and that one of the first actions of the next Conservative Government must be to bring the Bill back and get it through Parliament?

Theresa Villiers: We will do exactly that, because the Environment Bill has a really strong package of measures to respond to the grave public concern about plastics pollution. The public are determined to tackle this issue, and so are the Conservative Government.

T5. [900266] Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Despite the Prime Minister’s bluster, we are not leaving the European Union today. If we were, his deal would mean that tomorrow Scotland’s fishing fleet would still be subject to the common fisheries policy, but with added red tape and bureaucracy to get its catch to market. Should Scotland’s fishermen not use the upcoming election to stop this dreadful Tory deal?

George Eustice: I completely disagree with the hon. Gentleman. The Scottish fishing industry wants to leave the CFP and take advantage of the sea of opportunity that we will have when we become an independent coastal state. It is his party that is standing against the interests of the Scottish fishing industry by wanting to remain in the European Union.

T7. [900268] Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): I am keen that the next generation is engaged with why climate change happens and what they can do to prevent its impact. Harrogate Borough Council is putting in place a scheme that gives every schoolchild in the borough the opportunity to plant a tree, which will be both fun and educational. Will the Minister encourage other authorities and bodies to offer that opportunity to every schoolchild in our country?

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Zac Goldsmith): I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and I commend Harrogate Borough Council. The National Trust has said that a child today is three times more likely to go to hospital for falling out of bed than falling out of a tree. Obviously I do not recommend either activity, but there is no doubt that children who are insulated from nature are losing out; I very much agree with him. Working with the Woodland Trust and community forests, we are on track to meet our target of planting 1 million trees at English primary schools by 2020, and we committed in the 25-year environment plan to encourage children to be closer to nature in and out of school. The last week of November is National Tree Week, and I strongly encourage Members to plant trees with their local schools, so that we can all celebrate together.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, our careers have been somewhat in parallel. I had a slight interregnum in the middle of your speakership, but I am pleased to be here today, to top and tail it. We have remained good friends throughout.

The Government committed to keeping the current level of farm spending until the end of this Parliament, which will be in the next couple of days. The Labour party will commit to keep that level of spending and, indeed, even spending more under the new system, which will be expensive to introduce. Will the Government make that commitment?

George Eustice: The hon. Gentleman is right; the Government are committed to keep spending exactly the same until the end of this Parliament. He will have to wait to see our manifesto to find out what will happen in the next Parliament, but I will simply say this. It is implicit in the Agriculture Bill that there will be a transition over a period of seven years, during which we will roll out the new policy, and we have already committed to fund the objectives of the Agriculture Bill.
Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): The Woodland Trust, of which I am a keen member, believes that we can increase the amount of tree coverage by natural regeneration. That seems to be the best way of doing it, so how can we incentivise that within the new environmental land management scheme?

Zac Goldsmith: I thank my hon. Friend for his question, and he is absolutely right. Much of what we need to do to tackle climate change and restore nature involves rewilding or natural regeneration. A growing number of projects around the country are already delivering vast benefits. For example, at Knepp Castle in West Sussex, agri-environment funding has helped to create extensive grassland and scrub habitats, with huge benefits for declining bird species such as the turtle dove and the nightingale. As he says, the new environmental land management scheme will be transformative, because it will make subsidies conditional on the delivery of public goods such as biodiversity, woodland and flood management. It really could be the big thing that improves biodiversity in this country, which of course means increasing tree cover and encouraging natural regeneration.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Rebecca Pow): The Environment Bill does not actually include targets; it only requires Ministers to set them. Those targets could be 15 years in the future, they could be lower than current standards and they need be nothing more than aspirations. The Prime Minister has said that he would “enshrine the highest standards” in law. Obviously, nobody believes a word that the Prime Minister says, but does the Minister agree that there should be a legislative commitment to non-regression from current environmental standards?

The right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, was asked—

Speaker’s Advisory Committee on Works of Art: Frequency of Reports

1. Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): How frequently the Commission receives reports from the Speaker’s Advisory Committee on Works of Art?

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington): The Speaker’s Advisory Committee on Works of Art publishes an annual report, which is considered by the House’s Finance Committee. The Commission does not receive routine updates. The annual report for 2018-19 was published on the Committee’s website yesterday.

Patrick Grady: The right hon. Gentleman will be amazed that I am not asking him about electronic voting for a change. This question was originally on the Order Paper in July, when Winnie Ewing was celebrating her 90th birthday. In a couple of weeks—on 2 November—we will mark 52 years since her historic by-election win and of the continuous representation of the Scottish National party in the House of Commons. Has the Commission been advised of any discussion by the Committee regarding commemorating Winnie’s immense contribution in this place with a portrait somewhere on the estate?

Tom Brake: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his question, although I am disappointed he did not manage to work electronic voting into it. He will be pleased to know that the Committee is conscious that Winnie Ewing is currently a notable absence from the parliamentary art collection. It is investigating the possibility of a temporary loan of a portrait for display in Parliament, and it will continue to search for a portrait painting or drawing to acquire for the permanent collection.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, may I quickly say what a joy you have been for all genuine Back Benchers during your time in the Chair? We started a relationship early in your career
here, and I saw you improve as a parliamentarian step by step. People sometimes forget the great inquiry you made into special educational needs under Tony Blair. I also remember other good things that you did with me, and others, on anti-bullying, as well as a cross-party campaign on autism.

Someone should also mention what you had to put up with due to the concerted malicious press campaign that was run against you, and your family, at a certain time in your career. It was a disgrace to British journalism and the profession of journalism. It did not come from the redtops—it was *The Times* and the Prime Minister’s *Daily Telegraph*. It came from journalists from whom we had expected better. Some of us stood by you at that time, and we will continue to stand by you. You are a young man with a career in front of you. I hope that you will do startling things, and that this miserable Prime Minister, who yesterday could not even pay tribute to the Father of the House, will put you in the House of Lords as your office deserves.

Mr Speaker: That is extraordinarily kind of the hon. Gentleman. I think he was also going to ask about the Speaker’s Advisory Committee on Works of Art.

Mr Sheerman: I like the range of art that we have, Mr Speaker, but it should be more accessible. Why do we have to pay a surcharge in our shops to pay for your art?

Mr Speaker: Very good. The hon. Gentleman is a dextrous parliamentarian who can always think on his feet.

Tom Brake: I believe that was probably a bid for a portrait of you to be provided in the House, Mr Speaker; so we look forward to that.

**Independent Complaints and Grievance Scheme**

2. Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): To ask the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington, representing the House of Commons Commission, what progress the Commission has made on implementing the independent complaints and grievance scheme.

Tom Brake: Good progress is being made on implementing the independent complaints and grievance scheme, and on the recommendations by Dame Laura Cox and Gemma White, QC, to improve the working culture of the House. Complainants with non-recent cases, and former members of the parliamentary community who were not previously covered by the scheme, were able to access it from Monday 21 October this year. A staff group is examining options for implementing the Cox recommendation on independent determination of complaints against Members.

Justin Madders: I do not believe that the Commission is making good progress. It has been a year since the Dame Laura Cox report came out, and historical cases were finally reopened only last week. Recommendation 3 makes it clear that there must be an entirely independent process for investigating complaints of bullying and harassment in which Members of Parliament do not take part. It has been a year; it has gone on too long. Does the right hon. Gentleman understand how important it is for staff to have confidence in the system and know that Members of Parliament are not involved in judging their peers?

**Tom Brake**: I agree that there should be a completely independent process, and I regret that 12 months on that has not been resolved. A group is making good progress on that, and it expects to report back to the Commission later this year. I hope that by the end of this year that issue will be resolved.

Jim McMahon (Oldham West and Royton) (Lab/Co-op): May I thank you, Mr Speaker, for the support you have given me as a relatively new Member, and for the visit that you made to Manchester after the Manchester Arena attack, which killed two of my constituents? That meant a great deal to the families, and to me as a local parliamentarian. I thank you for that.

A great deal of work has been done by the Commission, but what work is being undertaken to give Members of Parliament the adequate legal support they need to carry out their duties? Many of us have been the voice of people who have been mistreated, and we have called out corruption, mismanagement and fraud. When we seek help when we are the target of harassment, however, we are left wondering where that support is. Will the right hon. Gentleman look into that very real issue, so that MPs are not bullied, harassed and intimidated into eventually moving away from the responsibilities they have in representing their constituents?

**Tom Brake**: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that question. If he is referring to particular cases, he can pass the details on to me. I am aware that support has been made available to Members of Parliament against whom legal cases have been pursued. I will follow that up if he is able to pass me the details.

**Digitising Parliamentary Processes**

3. Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What recent progress the Commission has made on digitising parliamentary processes.

**Tom Brake**: As I hope that Members are aware, the House of Commons and the Parliamentary Digital Service have made significant progress in digitising various parliamentary processes, such as through the Members’ hub for tabling questions digitally. Members might not be aware that “Erskine May” was made publicly available online for the very first time in July this year and is available through the UK Parliament website.

Chi Onwurah: You were my first Speaker, Mr Speaker. I wish you and your family every happiness. I find it very hard to imagine this Chamber without you, although I do hope the electorate in Newcastle give me the opportunity to find out. You have been a great reforming, inclusive, witty and stimulating Speaker, both in this Chamber and across the country. Your visits to Newcastle mean that you will be very fondly remembered by the people of my great city.

Part of the reforms you have instigated, Mr Speaker, have been on the digital and technology front. I congratulate the Parliamentary Digital Service and the right hon. Member for Carshalton and Wallington (Tom Brake) on the progress that has been made in making us more
effective technically—the Members’ hub, the digitisation of tabling questions and support for Android—but there is much, much more to be done if we are to be truly as effective as possible. I know that Members of Parliament are very hard use cases to tie down, but participation in the development and design of digital processes is essential. What will he do to ensure that new and returning Members are part of design processes so that technology empowers us, as it should for all our constituents?

**Tom Brake:** I can reassure the hon. Lady and other Members that if they have issues about the way the Members’ hub works, for instance, they can simply walk the short distance from here to the Table Office. I understand that the Table Office, on a monthly basis, reviews suggestions and possible improvements that Members have drawn to their attention. I know personally, from having raised an issue, that that has then been reflected in how the system works. I therefore encourage all Members—perhaps in the new Parliament we will need to remind new Members of this fact—to remember that the Table Office is there, and that it will respond to and review matters on a monthly basis.

**Jim Shannon** (Strangford) (DUP): May I put on record my thanks to you, Mr Speaker, for the encouragement you have given me? I remember my first day here in 2010 and seeing my name on the entrance as I came in. I remember your firm handshake and the friendship you showed, which put me very much at ease. As a Back Bencher, I thank you for giving me and others the opportunity to express ourselves on many occasions, which we have done. I also thank you for your encouragement, guidance and friendship. To your wife Sally and your family, I say thank you so much. It will never be forgotten: not by me and not by many in the House. Thank you.

What consideration has been given to encouraging more paperless routes to parliamentary procedure in an attempt to be an example to businesses outside this place on how to cut down and make the most of physical resources?

**Tom Brake:** I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that that has happened and that there are further changes in the pipeline, for instance in relation to Committees, legislation and Members’ web pages. The changes he seeks to introduce to make this place a paperless environment are in the pipeline and, I hope, will be delivered over the next few years.

**CHURCH COMMISSIONERS**

*The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—*

**Climate Change: Investment in Companies**

4. **Michael Tomlinson** (Mid Dorset and North Poole) (Con): What progress the Church of England has made on holding the companies in which it invests to account on climate change.

**The Second Church Estates Commissioner** (Dame Caroline Spelman); Since this is my last set of oral questions, I would like to record my heartfelt thanks to my small team of staff, and especially my constituency secretary, who has faithfully served me for 20 out of 22 years. We often forget that our staff are on the frontline of much of the abuse that we receive, and I want to record my admiration for their fortitude. I also thank the amazing staff I have had to support me in this role, particularly Simon Stanley at Church House.

In tribute, Mr Speaker, I thank you for your kindness and courtesy—unfailingly so, and especially at times of personal duress. I single out your inspired choice of Speaker’s Chaplain, who has enriched the spiritual life of this place—but more of that later.

The Church of England Pensions Board has tabled a shareholder resolution ahead of the annual general meeting of BHP Billiton, the world’s largest mining company, on 7 November this month. It asks BHP to suspend its membership of trade associations that are not lobbying in line with the climate change agreement. This is just the latest example of the Church Commissioners using their shareholder position to change company policy in line with the climate change agreement.

**Michael Tomlinson:** Just as much as you will be missed, Mr Speaker—tributes are being paid to you—I know that my right hon. Friend will also be missed. This is her last set of questions and it is a pleasure to ask her about eco-churches. Last year, Salisbury became the first diocese to be awarded the status of eco-diocese. Ten churches in my constituency have signed up to the project. Will she tell the House what more the Church can do to help to tackle climate change?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** My hon. Friend’s illustration shows that the Church is consistent from top to bottom in its determination to tackle climate change. Today we can really celebrate the fact that Salisbury diocese, with all that it has had to cope with, is indeed the first to win an award for an entire diocese. These awards are provided by the Christian environmental charity, A Rocha. Perhaps upon hearing this, all Members in the Chamber might like to encourage their churches and diocese to become eco-churches and an eco-diocese, because that would demonstrate consistency from top to bottom across the Church.

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): I, too, pay warm tribute to the right hon. Lady; she is an absolutely magnificent woman.—[Interruption.] And I should know. She has done so much on so many different subjects, and it has been great that she took on this role, which is not often wanted by many MPs. She has carried it off with great panache and we should be grateful to her. She has also done a lot on the restoration and renewal of this Palace, and that will stand testament to her when she has gone.

I do not know the right hon. Lady’s favourite hymn, but mine is

“Hills of the North, rejoice, river and mountain spring”.

Right at the heart of the Christian gospel is surely a belief that we must preserve the planet on which we live—creation that was given to us for future generations. Must that not be at the heart of all the decisions that the Church of England makes?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** I thank the hon. Gentleman for his very kind words. I nearly invited my family to come and sit in on this last set of questions, but I think
that if they had heard that description, there might have been a little heckling from the Gallery, so it is a big relief that they will read about it without having the opportunity to heckle.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right, and the Church needs to set an example in terms of its stewardship of the earth’s resources, which we are charged to look after. I certainly recognise that every one of us in this Chamber has an absolute duty to make sure that we leave this planet in a better place than we inherited it when we were born on to it. Of course, I wish him the very best with his candidature for the speakership, and I urge whomever is elected Speaker, with the forthcoming restoration and renewal, to think very, very hard about ensuring that the future Parliament is a green Parliament.

PUBLIC ACCOUNTS COMMISSION

The hon. Member for Gainsborough, the Chairman of the Public Accounts Commission, was asked—

HS2: National Audit Office Progress Review

5. Dame Cheryl Gillan (Chesham and Amersham) (Con): What is the timeframe for the publication of the National Audit Office’s progress review on High Speed Two.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough): Before I answer that question, Mr Speaker, I would like to thank you for your friendship over the years. I do not always agree with you, but in this place, John, friendship is more important than agreement, so thank you very much.

The NAO expects to publish its progress review of High Speed 2 in early 2020. The NAO expects to examine progress since its last value-for-money study in 2016, the reasons for cost and schedule increases, and the risk to value for money that remain.

Dame Cheryl Gillan: In his bombshell report, Allan Cook, the chairman of HS2, admitted publicly that HS2 was billions of pounds over budget and years behind schedule. Quite frankly, given HS2’s poor corporate governance and the rapid turnover of not only senior staff but Ministers, who are supposed to have oversight of this project, may I encourage the NAO to provide an in-depth report on the financial operations and probity of HS2, and can this report be made available to Douglas Oakervee, who is carrying out the Oakervee review of HS2? That review should not report until it has had the advantage of the NAO analysis, and I hope that this project will then be cancelled or radically changed.

Sir Edward Leigh: Of course the NAO will not get involved in the political argument about whether the programme is wise, but it has already reported three times on HS2. It found that the cost and benefit estimates underpinning the business case were uncertain, and addressed the weaknesses in the business case and in the estimate of the cost of land. I assure my right hon. Friend that the NAO will leave no stone unturned to ensure we get value for money from this project, if it proceeds.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Order. Colleagues. I would like to accommodate all remaining Questions on the Order Paper, but we must also consider those waiting for subsequent business. I do not intend or wish to be guilty of any discourtesy to colleagues in that regard, so I appeal to colleagues who are being accommodated late to be pithy. In so far as we have taken up time because people have been extraordinarily nice about me, while that is enjoyable for me, from this point on it is unnecessary.

Leaving the EU: National Audit Office

6. Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): What assessment the National Audit Office has made of the potential effect on its work of the UK leaving the EU.

Sir Edward Leigh: Brexit is, of course, a major task for Departments. Since 2016, the NAO has published 26 reports on aspects of Brexit. Most recently it has published reports on the UK’s border preparedness for Brexit and on Brexit’s implications for the supply of medicines to the health and social care sectors.

Martin Vickers: My right hon. Friend and I represent neighbouring and largely Brexit-supporting constituencies, and of course we want to get Brexit done as quickly as possible, but can I ask how the NAO will approach post-Brexit financial audit?

Sir Edward Leigh: The NAO wants to get the Brexit work done as quickly and efficiently as possible and has been working with all Departments to assess the potential impact on their financial performance of the decision to exit the EU. The exact impact in the current year may depend on the outcome of negotiations.

CHURCH COMMISSIONERS

The right hon. Member for Meriden, representing the Church Commissioners, was asked—

Archbishops of Canterbury and York: Workload

7. Michael Fabricant (Lichfield) (Con): What assessment has been made of the effect of the workload of the Archbishops of (a) Canterbury and (b) York on their ability to carry out their functions effectively; and if she will make a statement.

The Second Church Estates Commissioner (Dame Caroline Spelman): The Archbishops of York and Canterbury have many duties in relation to the northern and southern provinces of the Church of England, and the Archbishop of Canterbury is also the spiritual leader of the Anglican communion, a global network numbering tens of millions of members. There is no doubt in my mind that both these men are able and effective.

Michael Fabricant: But both these men are overworked. My right hon. Friend—indeed the whole House—will be aware that 1,200 years ago, Archbishop Hyeberlht was the Archbishop of Lichfield. It seems to me that you, Mr Speaker, could have a future role in your retirement as the Archbishop of Lichfield—
Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Canterbury!

Michael Fabricant: No, Lichfield. We want him in Lichfield and then the hard work done by the Archbishops of Canterbury and York could be shared. We have that precedent; we want you now.

Dame Caroline Spelman: Fortunately, I had a little advance notice of the tenor of my hon. Friend’s question. He is absolutely right that, for around 16 years between 787 and 803, there was an Archbishop of Lichfield. This arose from the fact that King Offa, in the kingdom of Mercia, struck a deal with the Pope, requesting an archbishop to be named to serve in his kingdom, but that deal involved sending an annual shipment of gold to the Pope for alms and supplying the lights for St Peter’s church in Rome. My hon. Friend, as the Member for Lichfield, might like to make a similar offer to the Archbishop of Canterbury.

Community Reconciliation

8. Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): What role the Church of England plays in leading community reconciliation processes. [900276]

Dame Caroline Spelman: The Church of England is involved in reconciliation work, both at home and abroad, and most recently on the international scene, the leadership of the Church of England has worked with the Roman Catholic Church on peace-building in Sudan, convening a meeting of Sudanese leaders in the Vatican. The Archbishop of Canterbury identified reconciliation as one of the key priorities for his tenure.

Rachael Maskell: Thank you, Mr Speaker, for the veracity with which you have chaired this House and the firm but kind way in which you have held that office. We recognise your service, but also the sacrifice you have made for this Parliament and our democracy.

I thank the right hon. Lady for her reply and also wish her well in her retirement. Our communities are divided and so many people across our country are broken at this time, so what is the Church of England doing to drive forward a process of peace and reconciliation for the future of our country?

Dame Caroline Spelman: There is an active proposition to initiate a reconciliation process, run out of Coventry. The cathedral of Coventry has a mission for peace and reconciliation because of its heritage. The Archbishop of Canterbury has spearheaded this offer. I do not know much about retirement, but I have offered to help with this process, because there is no doubt that we need to heal the divisions in our society. The Church has the necessary infrastructure—a cathedral in every city; a church in every parish—to help us to do this.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): May I also pay huge tribute to the Second Church Estates Commissioner, who has done an amazing job?

With regard to paying tribute to the Archbishop of Canterbury and His Holiness the Pope, I was in the Vatican representing the Prime Minister. The work is amazing. Does the Second Church Estates Commissioner agree that one key thing that we need to do is to ensure that our diplomats have appropriate religious literacy training so that they can carry on such work on religious reconciliation around the world?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. I certainly welcome him to this Question Time in his role as the special envoy for freedom of religion and belief. He can do important work within the Foreign Office to deliver on promises that officials will be required to undertake religious literacy training before postings to countries where it is really important to understand the role of religion in the culture and life of those nations.

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): What is the Church of England doing to help women leaving prison to strengthen family and community ties?

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to say on behalf of colleagues that we are hugely grateful to my right hon. Friend for her service to us here and to the Church in her role as the 41st Second Church Estates Commissioner. She has listened and acted as a wise counsel and an adviser behind the scenes to the Church, the General Synod, the Government and the many colleagues here who have raised concerns with her about the big questions of the day: the persecution of Christians overseas, Church schools and buildings, and strengthening our communities.

My right hon. Friend has helped the cause of getting mothers’ names on marriage certificates and has been a great all-round advocate for the role of faith in public life—not forgetting, too, that she was our first female Second Church Estates Commissioner. She will, I am sure, continue to be a positive voice and a presence for people of faith outside this place, and she will be greatly missed here.

Dame Caroline Spelman: Those are such kind words, and I will treasure them; I really appreciate the thought that went into expressing them. On the work of our prison chaplains and in particular the focus on ex-prisoners being reconciled into their communities, my hon. Friend is right. I did in fact host a meeting in Parliament with Bishops Christine and Rachel of Newcastle and Gloucester respectively, which focused on the great need there is to provide a suitable transition for women as they leave prison and return to the community and to address some of the long-standing issues from which they suffer.

I commend the work of the Re-Unite project in Gloucester and the Anawim women’s centre in Birmingham; they are doing a remarkable job in helping these women make that transition.

Mr Speaker: The hon. Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) has offered a beautiful tribute, but every word of it was richly deserved by the right hon. Lady.

Telecommunications: Use of Churches

9. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): What discussions she has had with the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport on the effective use of churches in the telecommunications network. [900277]

Dame Caroline Spelman: This is a subject that my right hon. Friend has been very diligent in drawing to my attention. I recently met the Minister for digital and broadband, my hon. Friend the Member for Boston and Skegness (Matt Warman), and we had a really
positive discussion about the work the Church is doing to increase access to digital and broadband networks in rural areas. Hon. Members may recall that the Church signed an accord with the Government to put at their disposal all church buildings and land to try to make sure we can eradicate those notspots in rural areas.

Sir Desmond Swayne: This is an issue on which the right hon. Lady has been both most helpful and assiduous, as she has been in the discharge of every duty she has undertaken in the 20 years that I have known her. I thank her for that service and wish her all the best for the future.

Dame Caroline Spelman: I am not sure what can be said in answer to that, but hon. Members present will know with what great affection my right hon. Friend is held, affectionately known by most of us as Dessie. There is no one I would rather entrust my life to in a tight spot than this remarkable, brave individual.

On the matter raised, I just want to record the Church’s welcome for the announcement made by the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport of match funding with £500 million for the initiative by mobile providers to share masts. It does not deal with the shortfall, where there are no masts, but that is where the Church intends to help.

Given the Secretary of State’s announcement that she is retiring, I would like to record my grateful thanks to her for her work in this Parliament.

Thefts from Churches

10. Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): What recent assessment the Church of England has made of trends in the level of thefts from churches.

Dame Caroline Spelman: As we have seen all too clearly in the recent very heavy rainfall, wet weather is often the moment we realise we have a hole in the roof, and, sadly, many churches have discovered that through the theft of lead from church roofs. It is only when the weather turns inclement that thousands of pounds worth of damage is done, which small congregations simply do not have the resources to meet. The Church is working closely with the police and other partners to raise awareness and encourage local parishes to take precautions, such as having roof alarms or SmartWater marking, so we can fend off what is organised crime.

Diana Johnson: May I, too, join in the tributes to the right hon. Lady in this role and the other roles that she has had in this place and say that I am sad she is leaving, and I am sad that she cited some of the abuse that she has received as one of the reasons that she is leaving this place?

On the specific question, what work is going on to consider the replacement of lead roofs with those of other materials such as steel or zinc?

Dame Caroline Spelman: I thank the hon. Lady for those very kind words, and indeed, with the full support of my staff, I did speak out about the abuse we face and that might perhaps be part of my legacy to this place; I hope sincerely that those who are returned will really do something about it, particularly by tackling the wild west of the internet where there is not sufficient regulation of what is expressed, although I commend the guidance given by the Church of England about how to navigate the internet wisely.

On the point raised, it is important to share the following information, because theft from churches, particularly of roofs, affects many colleagues. New guidance has been published by Historic England on non-lead metal roofs for churches, to deter the risk of metal theft. It is important to note that even a grade I listed building can be fitted with lead substitutes, which do not therefore attract the type of crime that I described at the beginning and is causing so much damage and cost.

Marriage: 16 and 17-year-olds

11. Mrs Pauline Latham (Mid Derbyshire) (Con): What assessment the Church of England has made of the potential merits of ending marriages involving 16 and 17-year-olds.

Dame Caroline Spelman: The legal position is that 16 and 17-year-olds are entitled to have their banns published and to marry in church, I am sure that all Members who have been to an Anglican wedding will be familiar with the moment during the service when the priest asks whether anyone has an objection to the marriage. That is part of the marriage process. When a young couple are preparing for marriage, they are prepared by the priest for the very profound decision that they are making. However, those of such a tender age constitute only a very small percentage of the number who marry in Anglican churches.

Mrs Latham: May I echo the words of my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and reiterate that my right hon. Friend will be missed when she leaves this place?

Does my right hon. Friend agree that, given the international reach of the Anglican communion, the Church of England’s support for ending marriages between 16 and 17-year-olds in the UK would send a powerful message to other jurisdictions and faith communities around the world?

Dame Caroline Spelman: As I mentioned earlier, the Anglican communion covers a very large number of nations and a very large number of people whose cultural norms differ from our own, but aid agencies often handle the issue of child marriage very effectively through their health and education programmes. I particularly commend the work of the Mothers Union in this respect. Its members are active in, for instance, southern Sudan with finance and literacy programmes to ensure that families do not rely on dowry payments as a way to sustain themselves. Dioceses in Kenya work with the community to prevent child marriage, and there are similar arrangements in Ghana. The Mothers Union also has initiatives to tackle child marriage in the United States of America, because in 13 states there is no minimum age for marriage.

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): May I, too, pay my tribute to my right hon. Friend? She and I entered the House on the same day in 1997, as did you, Mr Speaker. We have shared many worthwhile causes, and she will be greatly missed. One of those

...
causes was, of course, marriage certificates, whether for marriages between 16 and 17-year-olds or for any other marriages. As a result of my Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration etc) Act 2019, mothers' names will at last be added to those certificates.

Will my right hon. Friend update us on the progress that is being made ahead of the digital registration that is to be introduced? Is it the case that in certain churches, the Church of England has given its agreement to the manual writing of hard-copy certificates until the necessary technology is available? That, I am sure, would be a welcome common-sense measure.

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. We did indeed enter Parliament together, and in those early weeks when we did not really have an office, and we were adjusting to the long-hours culture, and we missed our children—I was pining for mine—he was kind enough to make me hot cocoa late at night. I have not forgotten those early times.

Let me update the House. My hon. Friend was the Member of Parliament who landed the prize of securing a change in the law of 1837 that did not allow mothers the same right as fathers in terms of marriage registration, but progress is slow on the accompanying regulation. My hon. Friend may wish to join me in putting some pressure on the future Government to complete that registration into the digital age, many mums who are hoping to have that new right can achieve it in the short term by means of a simple practical solution.

**Digital Technology: New Congregations**

12. **Andrew Rosindell** (Romford) (Con): What assessment the Church of England has made of the effectiveness of the use of digital technologies to reach new congregations.

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** During my time as Second Church Estates Commissioner, I have seen the Church of England transform its digital communications. Its annual mission statistics show, for example, that the Daily Prayer app has been downloaded more than 5 million times and is used on average for eight minutes per user per day; our social media now reaches 3.6 million people; the A Church Near You website allows people to google their nearest church and the times of the services there; and an Alexa skill set up by the Church has had more than 100,000 inquiries.

**Andrew Rosindell:** I thank my right hon. Friend for her answer and for the incredible job she has done as the Second Church Estates Commissioner. She has been truly amazing and a great friend to many of us. I have fond memories of her not only in her current role but on many occasions in Switzerland on the annual skiing visit. I would like to thank her for her friendship.

The Church is central to all our communities, and engaging with the wider public is ever more important. Will my right hon. Friend tell us more about what the Church intends to do to ensure that wider engagement through the use of social media and digital is rolled out more widely across the whole country?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** I thank my hon. Friend for his kind words. For the record, I must say that being Second Church Estates Commissioner has been a great blessing. When I was invited to do the job, David Cameron said to me, “The thing about this role, Caroline, is that you are answerable only to the Queen and God.” What a privilege that is!

It so happens that I met the diocesan directors of communication yesterday at Canterbury cathedral, and they are all really aware of the transition that the Church needs to make into a fully digital version of what it does today. I have given the House an indication of that, but for those of us who still like a hard copy of things to inspire us, I draw hon. Members’ attention to the fact that the forthcoming busy time will at some point be coterminous with Advent, for which the Church has published a “Follow the Star” booklet, which hon. Members are welcome to avail themselves of.

**Mr Speaker:** That was magnificently done. I hope that I can be forgiven for saying to the hon. Member for Romford (Andrew Rosindell), and more widely to the House, that as the hon. Gentleman referenced Switzerland, and I am on my last day, he has given me my cue to say that the best thing about Switzerland is not its skiing, its chocolate, its watches or its financial services; the best thing about Switzerland is Roger Federer.

**Luke Graham** (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): Mr Speaker, I should like to pass on my thanks to you, on behalf of Scottish Conservative MPs. You have given us the opportunity to speak so that our constituents know that the Scottish National party is not the only voice for Scotland in this place. It is good for our Parliament, our country and our democracy that all the voices are heard, so I thank you for that.

What conversations have been had with the Department, and indeed the estates in Scotland, to ensure that the Government’s new initiatives on the shared rural network for mobile coverage and the exciting new developments on broadband will mean that the estates in Scotland can be used and leveraged so that my constituents can benefit as much as constituents elsewhere in the UK?

**Dame Caroline Spelman:** I am delighted to say that my responsibility covers only the Church of England, but obviously the Church in Scotland is part of the Anglican communion, and the opportunity to use church buildings, spires, towers and the ridges and hills on land that the Church owns is an obvious way to ensure that there are no more notspots in Scotland.
Points of Order

11.8 am

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Ind): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I want to raise a point of order in relation to the Early Parliamentary General Election Bill, which we expect to receive Royal Assent today. The Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament, of which I am the Chair, has been investigating the threat posed to this country by Russia. We have produced a report, which, in accordance with the Justice and Security Act 2013, we sent to the Prime Minister on 17 October for him to confirm that there were no classified matters remaining. There ought not to be, because the report has already been carefully looked at by the Cabinet Office. That confirmation should have been received by today to enable publication before the House is dissolved, but I regret to say that it has not been. We thus have a Committee of Parliament waiting to lay before the House a report that comments directly on what has been perceived as a threat to our democratic processes. Parliament and the public ought to and must have access to this report in the light of the forthcoming election, and it is unacceptable for the Prime Minister to sit on it and deny them that information. I raise this as a point of order in the hope that the theme of your speakership—the championing of the role of Parliament in holding to account the Executive—might be, through this point of order, as successful today as it has been over the previous decade.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman. He knows that it is not strictly a point of order for adjudication by the Chair, although his articulate efforts to raise the matter are, in my mind, perfectly legitimate. What he has said will have been heard by those on the Treasury Bench, and I understand that he seeks a response today. It is presumably of the essence and the utmost importance to him and his Committee that any such confirmatory response is at the very least received before Dissolution. I would hope that, as the Leader of the House is sitting on the Front Bench, we might make progress on this matter. It can potentially be expedited, and the Leader of the House might be willing to act as a messenger—or maybe more than a messenger—and we will have to see what the result is. The right hon. and learned Gentleman has made his point today, and it is potentially open to him to raise it on Monday—even on Monday—or on Tuesday, but I hope that it will not be necessary for him to raise the matter again.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. Time is of the essence. We have just heard about the matter, and there is some considerable concern among Opposition Members. Surely, a stronger message must go through the Leader of the House that the Prime Minister or a senior Cabinet Minister should put the matter right in the last few days of this Parliament.

Mr Speaker: I am sympathetic to the hon. Gentleman’s concerns, and I think it is fairly obvious to the Leader of the House that I am sympathetic to the concerns of the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). I am not myself privy to the rationale behind the absence of a confirmation. I do not know whether it is just an administrative matter because, to be fair, Prime Ministers have a very large volume of matters with which to deal, whether it is a transaction of business issue, or whether there is some substantive reason why the Prime Minister does not wish to provide the confirmatory response that the right hon. and learned Gentleman seeks. I cannot know which it is. It is not unreasonable for the Chair of the Intelligence and Security Committee to seek that confirmatory response in this Parliament or an explicit parliamentary explanation in the House as to the reason for its absence. That, I think, is fair.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. This is a slightly unusual circumstance, so may I seek your clarification? Can you confirm that the report cannot be published without that confirmation from the Prime Minister, or is this just a matter of best practice?

Mr Speaker: I think that that is the case. Of course, the Intelligence and Security Committee is not a Select Committee; it is a Committee of Parliament, and therefore different arrangements apply to it. It is encouraging to see the right hon. Members for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) and for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), who have some experience of the Committee and its responsibilities, nodding in assent.

Mr Grieve: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. I am grateful for your response. The position is that for the report to be published, it must be laid before the House on a sitting day. As long as that happens, it can be published and will be made available to the public. If it were to be laid on a day when the House is not sitting—even before Dissolution—the Committee would not be able to publish it. Therefore, we were hoping that it could be laid and published on Monday. The anxiety relates to the apparent delay, for which we have not been provided an explanation, and that has led me to make my point of order.

Mr Sheerman: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. This is a concern for all of us. There is the expertise here. This is a special Committee. What we do not understand is why this cannot be published on the authority of the House. Why can the Executive block this publication? Are they trying to hide something?

Mr Speaker: No, it is simply because the composition of the Committee and its modus operandi are determined in a manner different from those that apply to a Select Committee, which it is not. That is the factual answer. I understand the hon. Gentleman’s frustration but I think the matter has now been fully ventilated. The Lord President of the Council and Leader of the House has displayed exemplary patience, but I do not think we should test it further.
Tributes to the Speaker

11.15 am

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I do not need patience because proceedings in this House are always interesting. But let us now praise famous men. It was a privilege to propose you as Speaker in the 2015 Parliament and now, in the reverse of Mark Antony in relation to Caesar, I come not to bury you but to praise you, for that is the right thing to do when a period of long service comes to an end. That is not to deny that there will be a debate about your term of office, as there are debates about the terms of office of other Speakers in our history. However, I am very conscious that the good that men do is often interred with their end of service. I think the good that you have done should be heralded and that others at a later date will look at some of the criticisms that they may have. But now is not the occasion for that.

In 2009, when you first addressed this House as a candidate for the speakership, you said that you did not want “to be someone”, but rather that you wanted “to do something”. Your agenda was “reform”, “renewal” and “revitalisation”, and although I think the word “modernisation” is an expletive, which I rarely allow to sound forth from my lips, there can be no denying that during your decade in office you have worked tirelessly to achieve those objectives.

As the 157th Speaker, you have been a distinctive servant of Parliament, both in this place and beyond, representing the House to audiences around the United Kingdom and overseas. I think you share my conviction that politics is at its best when it is engaging. Your work with the United Kingdom Youth Parliament and your work with Parliament’s excellent education team should be celebrated. So many schools from my constituency have taken advantage of this service, and I have always been impressed by the knowledge of the people involved. I know that you had quite a battle to get the education building put up, and some people opposed you, but it has been a resounding success.

During your speakership, our parliamentary democracy has been under intense scrutiny. We have been fortunate to have in the Chair so accomplished a glottologist as you are, in order that language, as well as the intricate and profound workings of Parliament, can be understood by everyone. I think the words “chunter”, “medicament”, “dilate”, “animadvert” and, perhaps my favourite, “susurrations” have been popularised under your speakership and, I imagine, are now in common parlance in pubs and clubs across England—or at least in Boodle’s, the Beefsteak, Pratt’s and the Garrick. But those sorts of clubs probably enjoy those words greatly.

As you have dispensed your immediate duties from the Chair, you have come to be known as the Back Bencher’s champion. Our main purpose as Members of Parliament is to seek redress of grievance for our constituents, and you have been unswervingly diligent in your desire to ensure that all parliamentarians are treated equally, whether novice or hardened veteran. I cannot thank you enough for the help you gave me to ensure that we could get the drug Brineura for a constituent of mine: within about a week, you called me at oral questions, granted me an Adjournment debate and then gave me an urgent question, all of which helped to build pressure on the Government to act, to the great advantage of a very ill and very young constituent of mine. This is my view of what Parliament is about, and I think you facilitated that for me in a way that other Speakers may well not have done. My personal gratitude and, more importantly, the gratitude of the family who have benefited from that, is, I think, a real tribute to how you have operated. You have allowed parliamentarians to seek redress of grievance, and that is basically where our law making in this place comes from historically.

The ultimate, most important, highest duty of the Speaker of the House of Commons is to be the champion of our House and its Members, and to defend our right to freedom of speech in defence of our constituents. Mr Speaker, you have done that. During your time you have presided over what you yourself have termed the “rumbustious” Parliament. Now, as you step down from the office of Speaker of the House of Commons, having what is undoubtedly the highest honour that the House of Commons has in its power to bestow, I wish you a prosperous and successful retirement, and thank you and your family—Sally, Freddie, Jemima, and particularly the great Oliver, who I know has more my view of modernisation than your own, at least with regard to wigs.

11.20 am

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): May I start by thanking the Leader of the House for his statement? I note that there are no business questions this morning, but he did say that you would allow us a bit of latitude, Mr Speaker, so may I ask one question through you? When is Parliament likely to return after the election? Perhaps the Leader of the House could answer that in his own time.

Most people can read the basic facts about your life on your website, Mr Speaker, and on various other websites. You are the first Speaker since the second world war to have served alongside four Prime Ministers and to be elected to the post four times. I shall concentrate on my interactions with you.

Those of us in the 2010 intake were pleased that the rules were suspended slightly and we were allowed to ask questions before we made our first speeches. I think that made a huge difference to us. You spoke at, and gave up a Saturday evening for, the launch of the campaign to have a bust for Noor Inayat Khan, who served in the Special Operations Executive—Churchill’s special group. Karen Newman sculpted the wonderful bust that is now in Gordon Square. Noor was executed in the Dachau concentration camp. It was important to recognise her.

You allowed me the use of Speaker’s House for the launch of the Sidney Goldberg competition, which you attended and spoke at. Sidney Goldberg was in the headquarters ship during the D-Day landings. It is important that you have opened up the use of Speaker’s House to civil society and charities—roughly eight a week, more than 150 a year. It is really important for people to see what goes on in Speaker’s House, and I am sure many people will thank you for that. When fielding a number of questions as guests walked through to the bed in the final room, we had to explain to them that it was not you and Sally who slept there.
[Valerie Vaz]

With your friend since 1982, the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis), you trained quite a lot of Tory candidates, and I am sure you have seen many of them here. You have obviously trained them well, because they have been quite argumentative towards you.

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): I was one of them.

Valerie Vaz: Ah!

Being in the Chamber is what you have loved most, Mr Speaker. Perhaps they are going to patent your bladder—the sight of Ian and Peter checking your vital signs as you leave after a long session is quite interesting. As many people have said, you have opened the Chamber up to urgent questions. You knew which Select Committee Members served on and called people appropriately for urgent questions and statements.

I will not forget the phone call that you made to me; I thought I had done something wrong, but you picked up the phone and said, “It’s Mr Speaker here. Would you like to come to Burma?” I think Joan Ruddock could not make it. It was great to be on that trip with you, and particularly to see your groundbreaking speech at the University of Yangon, before Daw Suu was elected. We went to Mon state, where we visited the legal aid clinic and then a school. There were people looking through windows with cameras. They were not actually following us—they were sent by someone else—but I remember you waving your hand and saying, “Who are those people? Send them away.” And they did go—they listened to you.

There is a phrase: “Behold the turtle. He only makes progress when he sticks his neck out.” I think people would say that you are a turtle on skids, Mr Speaker. You commissioned “The Good Parliament” report by Professor Scott, which and many of her recommendations, particularly on proxy voting, have now been implemented.

You produced a landmark report on speech, language and communication needs for children. Ican, the children’s charity, has done a follow-up report. “Bercow 10 years on”, and I hope that it has made a difference and they have seen the difference that your initial report has made.

The Leader of the House mentioned the Education Centre, which has been used by many of our schools. It is such a delight to walk through Speaker’s Yard to the Education Centre. It has made a huge difference to the understanding of Parliament.

I was privileged to sit on your group for the Speaker’s school council awards. It was incredible to see the level of the children’s entries, how they were thinking about other people and how they want to change society. It is a tribute to you that that happened.

Then, of course, there is the Youth Parliament. Since 2009, you have chaired every Youth Parliament and you have been to every annual conference. It is incredible to see the way the members of the Youth Parliament have risen to the occasion. I am sorry that you will not be here for the next one, on 8 November. The level of debate, as you know, is absolutely exemplary and something that we can learn from.

It is UK Parliament Week next week, from 2 to 10 November—as part of my contribution to business questions, I am adding bits of information. There will be 11,400 activities—15 in Walsall South, but 11 in North East Somerset, so it has some catching up to do.

Mr Speaker, you are chancellor of two universities: the University of Bedfordshire and, your alma mater, the University of Essex. I know that you will continue to teach them about how Parliament can be opened up.

You have opened up Parliament, which has been part of the golden triangle of accountability involving the Executive and the judiciary. Parliament is not the subservient partner, but, under your speakership, the equal and relevant partner. I say to the other side that I think you did do your job as a very impartial Speaker. I know that some of us on our side actually questioned you, calling other sides first. So everybody thinks that you are an impartial Speaker and have favourites one way or the other. However, you will be pleased to know that your ratings on the Parliament channel have gone up and that the word “Order” is now used by parents around the country as the new naughty step.

I thank your long-serving staff: Peter Barrett, Ian Davis and Jim Davye, those in your outer office and those in your inner office. They have always been absolutely exemplary to me, whether I was a Back Bencher or on the Front Bench, and to other Members.

Of course, we cannot forget the great Sally, who has always been by your side and supportive of the work that you do. We all need that person who will support us in our work—particularly Oliver, Freddie and Jemima. It was lovely to watch them in the Gallery yesterday, as they were looking down almost in tears. It was very nice for them to hear the tributes because I know that they have faced difficult times in the playground when you have been attacked.

So, John Simon Bercow, this was your life in Parliament. We wish you well in whatever you choose to do, and you go with our grateful thanks and best wishes.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Mr Rees-Mogg: The answer to the right hon. Lady’s question is that the expectation is that we will come back on the Monday after the general election for swearing in.

11.28 pm

Sir Alan Duncan (Rutland and Melton) (Con): Mr Speaker, may I echo the heartfelt comments that have been made about you from so many quarters over the past few days? May I do so by way of two confessions, which I have been needing to get off my chest? The first is that I was at a primary school—it is always there that you get the difficult questions—and I was asked, “What is the rudest thing that anyone has ever said to you in politics?” I thought for a bit and said, “Do you know what, it is when someone came up to me in the street and said, ‘Good morning, Mr Bercow.’” I hope that you will forgive me for that. The second confession is rather worse. I may well burn in the fiery flames of hell for ever having done this. I am known occasionally in the Tea Room to have referred to you as Mr Speaker Hobbit. I hope that you will forgive me this affectionate teasing.
and, in paying my own tribute to you, it gives me
to wish you the best for the future.

Mr Speaker: I gently point out that a hobbit is a
friendly creature.

11.29 am

Pete Wishart (Perth and North Perthshire) (SNP): Thank you, Mr Speaker, and I say that for the last time.

I was, of course, one of your nominees 10 years ago. I
would therefore like to congratulate myself on my solid
and sound judgment on that occasion. I always knew
that you would make an excellent Speaker. Even that
awful impersonation you did of Peter Tapsell when you
were trying to be elected did not disabuse me of that
notion. But I did not know that you would be such a
transformative Speaker. The way in which we do business
in this Chamber is now forever changed because of your
speakership. You have pioneered and transformed. The
speakership of this House is now no longer just about
overseeing the business in the Chamber, and the way in
which we debate and interact with each other. It is
about asserting the rights of Parliament and championing
parliamentary democracy. And you have been singularly
brave in the way you have challenged various Governments
who believed that it was their gift always to get their
way. We will never go back to those days now, because
of the way in which you have challenged that assumption.

I will never forget sitting with you in that curry house
in Buckingham, when MP4 did a gig for you in your
constituency. That curry house stayed open because
Mr Speaker was coming with some strange guests from
a rock band, and the vindaloo you ordered that night
had to be specially prepared. We could not get you to
come up on stage with us that evening, but now you
have a bit more time. Given the Prime Minister’s Sinatra
reference yesterday, maybe you could give us a rendition
of “My Way”; we would happily supply the backing for
that occasion.

The culture of this House has been totally and radically
transformed. You have ensured that the Back Benchers
are now fully accommodated. I have been here long
enough to remember the days when urgent questions
and statements were cut off after half an hour or
40 minutes, and it would always be the Back Benchers
and Members of the smaller parties who would lose out
on an opportunity to say something and give their point
of view on the issue of the day. That no longer happens.
Everybody is now accommodated. I hope that that
transformation that you have made will continue to be
adopted as we go forward. We all now get the opportunity
to give our point of view in this House, and it is
important that that remains the case. For that, we thank
you.

We on these Benches will miss you, and you will
forever be a friend of Scotland and of the Scottish
National party. On behalf of our party, I wish you
and your family—Sally, Freddie, Jemima and Oliver—all
the very best for the future. I wish your staff, Peter, Ian
and Jim, all the best as well. I hope that you enjoy the
next stage of what has already been a fascinating and
unique journey. You are a one-off, sir, and we will miss
you.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

11.33 am

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): Mr Speaker, a
couple of days ago, you commended me for my brevity,
so let me be brief. Two weeks ago you were kind
enough—or possibly unkind enough—to remind me
that I was the longest serving member of the Panel of
Chairs. Let me say on behalf of that panel, thank you
for your guidance and wisdom over very many years of
service. All your friends on the panel wish you and your
family well in your retirement.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I call the Mother of the
House, Harriet Harman.

11.34 am

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): Mr Speaker, you are my fifth Speaker now, and I can
say from that experience that you have been a remarkable
Speaker of this House. You have been a champion of
Parliament and a reformer. As other hon. and right
hon. Members have said, you have thought about opening
up this House so that young people all around the
country can see that it is their Parliament that is here for
them. You have been a great champion of the Youth
Parliament. The Leader of the House and the shadow
Leader of the House were right to say that everybody
agrees with that now and recognises that it is a thoroughly
good thing, but you had to fight for it because there
were those who resisted change and said, “We cannot
have all these children here in the House of Commons.
We’ve got work to be done.” You relentlessly, and in a
principled way, pushed for it, and I thank you for that.

You have used the Speaker’s state rooms to give
outside organisations a sense that their work is recognised
by and valued in this Parliament. As the shadow Leader
of the House said, over 1,000 organisations have come
into this House, and the grandeur of those state rooms
has inspired and encouraged them, in knowing that
their works in communities all around the country are
valued here.

I would like to pay particular tribute to the work that
you have done for the women’s movement. Organisations
campaigning for equal pay have been in those grand
state rooms surrounded by those 20-foot-high portraits
of former Speakers. They have had their place there:
championing equal pay; those complaining that
we need more childcare; those campaigning against
domestic violence. They have been there; you have
done for the women’s movement. Organisations
valued here.

You actually turned one of the bars of the House of
Commons into a nursery for the children of staff in
Whitehall and in the House and of Members. That too
is something we can be proud of, but it is something
that you had to fight for. We had been fighting for it
for decades and had failed; it was not until you were in
the Chair that you made it happen. You supported
the coming into this Chamber of 100 women MPs from
100 Parliaments from all around the world so that here
in the mother of Parliaments we could validate their
work in their Parliaments all around the world.
I think we can fairly say that you are politically correct, but it was not always the case. You have been on what they describe as a political journey. You started off going towards the views of the Monday Club. You are woke now, but my goodness me, you were in the deepest of slumbers.

You really have made a huge difference in championing us here in the House. Above all, you have been concerned about the role of Parliament in being able to hold the Executive to account. That is not just about Back Benchers and Front Benchers; it is about the role of Parliament. Members who have come here more recently perhaps would not remember this—I thank the Library for getting this information for me—but in the 12 months before you took the Speaker's Chair, two urgent questions were granted in that whole time. The impact of that was that people outside the House would be discussing issues but they would not be discussed here, and therefore Parliament felt irrelevant. In the past 12 months, you have granted 152 UQs. You have made Parliament relevant. I thank you for that—but again, it has not always made you popular. Ministers would rather sit in their Departments talking to civil servants and junior Ministers who agree with them than come here and face the House. But it is better for Government to be held to account. It is easy to make mistakes when doing things behind closed doors. You have always believed that the minority must have its say in Parliament, and you have championed that, but you have also always believed that the majority must have its way, and that is right.

Precedent offers less help in unprecedented times, which we have been experiencing, but you have had a profound sense that you are accountable to the House and that you want to enable and facilitate the House, and that is what you have done. You leave the Chair in uncertain and, I would say, even dangerous times. Thank you for your support and recognition of all those Members—men as well as women—who have gone about their business under a hail of threats of violence. Our democracy should not have to experience that. I would like to thank you for being tireless in your work, and I would like to thank your family for their support of you. They can be rightly proud of what you have done, and we are too.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

11.40 am

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): I am disappointed that I am not able to put my question to the Leader of the House regarding the lack of funding from the national lottery for Southend West and the lousy ticket machines installed by C2C, but I will get over that.

The House is at its best when we are being nice to one another. This will not last, as we are about to embark upon a general election campaign. Mr Speaker, you and I have known each other for a long time, and I cannot imagine how you and the others who are leaving this place voluntarily must feel today. I wish each and every one of those colleagues every good fortune for the future.

You and I followed very different paths to this place. It has not been easy for you being the Speaker, particularly in the circumstances in which you took that great office, but you have been a champion of Back Benchers, in so far as you have ensured that every voice is heard, particularly when you notice that a voice is not always heard within a Member’s own political party. You would be the first to say that you could not have done the job so well without your magnificent backroom team—I am not going to show favouritism—of Peter, Ian and Jim. They have been wonderful.

I know that we will have tributes to Reverend Rose later, but she was an inspired choice. For those of the Catholic brethren who were in the Crypt last night, it was particularly wonderful to hear her speak with my great pal Father Pat Browne, who has just celebrated 10 years as the Catholic chaplain to the House.

Mr Speaker, among the things that you have done, you have made sure that it is worth while being on the Order Paper. It took colleagues a little time to get the hang of it, but you gave everyone on the Order Paper a chance to have their say. You have also done a magnificent job in promoting the work that you do throughout the country.

The election of the new Speaker will be held on Monday. A number of the contestants are in the Chamber at the moment, and each and every one of them would do the job splendidly. I did not seek to fill your shoes because those shoes would pinch. I do not have your photographic memory, but if there is an opportunity I would like to thank the Library for getting this information for me—but in the 12 months, they are a credit to you and Sally—of that there can be no doubt. I wish you every future success and every happiness, especially in your new role as a sports commentator.

Ms Angela Eagle (Wallasey) (Lab): Mr Speaker, I do not intend to repeat the warm and generous tributes that have been paid to you and your speakership today, except to agree wholeheartedly with all of them. There have been some extremely good summaries of the particular flavour that you have brought to the speakership.

Mr Speaker, you took over in very difficult times—right at the height of the controversies about expenses—when the House had to regain a great deal of good will from the public. You did so in a way that I think few would have expected, given where you began your political career. The thing I saw most quickly about you was that, although you had a respect for tradition, you also had a very open mind about how it needed to change. I referred to that in my own maiden speech, when I came into this House in 1992, and it is a rare combination. It is particularly rare. I suspect, coming from someone who began his life in the Federation of Conservative Students.

It was clear, Mr Speaker, that you had not only the capacity but the desire to go on a journey, and many of us noticed your particular commitment to your principles...
as you grew into them when you resigned from the Conservative Front Bench because you objected to being whipped to vote against the equalisation of the age of consent. It was nasty for anyone, in what was then a rapidly modernising social situation, to be expected to do that for their party.

The journey that you have taken on matters of equality, Mr Speaker, has been noticed by all those who were oppressed by not having access to it. It has been celebrated, and the LGBT community in particular owes you a great deal. You have been an untiring and unfailing champion for women's rights, for the rights of those who have disabilities, and for LGBT and BAME people. That commitment has been shown in many of the decisions you have taken in your executive role. I was privileged to be able to serve with you on not the most glamorous of committees—the Speaker's committee behind the scenes—as you drove forward some of the modernisation that you have been responsible for, as Members on both sides of the House have pointed out in their tributes to you today.

Mr Speaker, the reactionary resistance that you faced in driving that change—for example, on the education department, or to allow the Youth Parliament to sit in this Chamber—had to be seen to be believed. However, if I may say so, you have driven a coach and horses through that resistance and achieved real and lasting change, which—when you are finally in your bath chair, and I know that will be a very long time from now, watching Roger Federer still winning the veterans trophy at Wimbledon—I think you will be able to sit back and reflect very much on.

I have a couple of other points, Mr Speaker. One is that I have always loved your use of language and command of the House. You are never one who is content to say “medicine” when you can say “medication” or “suitcase” when you might say “portmanteau”. Many of us have enjoyed that aspect of your time in the Chair.

There is one place still far too hidebound by tradition that needs your open and reforming zeal, Mr Speaker, in order that we might deal with it. This is a question for the Leader of the House: why on earth does the right hon. Gentleman not get up now and say that he recognises the Leader of the House: why on earth does the right

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Mr Rees-Mogg: Mr Speaker, I think this has changed from a statement into a succession of speeches, and it would be tiresome for the House if I popped up every other moment.

11.50 am

Justine Greening (Putney) (Ind): Let me add my congratulations to you, Mr Speaker, on a fantastic 10 years as Speaker during which has probably been one of the most turbulent and difficult times that this House and this Parliament have seen. I echo all the points raised by others about how you have reformed the way the House works, and the causes you have championed. Our relationship has changed over the years. I have been a Back Bencher asking questions, as well as a shadow Minister, a Minister, and a Secretary of State—all while you sat in that Chair and adjudicated over our proceedings.

In my experience, the approach that you have taken to parliamentary matters, in particular urgent questions that have allowed Members to raise issues with Ministers and Departments, has been unfailingly fair. Whenever a Department has been genuinely getting on with an issue and had a good case to make for a question not being urgent, you have looked at that point and processed it fairly. I was a Minister for many years, and I never had any issues with the way you made such a decision. Indeed, I welcomed the chance for my Department and ministerial team to be held to account in the Chamber. In my view, your decision made us behave more appropriately and up our game, which is exactly what it was meant to do.

One final point that has not yet been highlighted is the Speaker's parliamentary placement scheme, which has enabled the House to become accessible to a range of young people from backgrounds that are very different from those of the more traditional cohorts of MPs and employees. Like a number of other Members, I have had two candidates from the scheme in my office over the past two years, and they were both outstanding. Not only did they learn, I hope, from the chance to take part in the scheme that you set up, but my office, my team and I also learned and grew from having those candidates as part of our team. The chance to open up Parliament to a new generation of young people who would otherwise not get the chance to come here, and let them realise that this is everybody's Parliament, is one of the most powerful steps you have taken. I very much hope that your successor will continue the scheme, and consider how it can be expanded so that young people from all over the country, and many more MPs, have the chance to experience the wonderful Speaker's parliamentary placement scheme.

Mr Speaker, you have been a parliamentary referee during perhaps the toughest game that we have played here for many years. I am sure that has taken its toll on you, your family, and the support you have received from them has been amazing. I wish you well in the next phase of your life. As I, too, leave this House, perhaps our paths will cross again, but in different capacities.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

11.53 am

Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): I will start from a slightly different place from other Members, and thank you, Mr Speaker, for the support you have given me on the House of Commons Commission. We have not necessarily seen eye to eye on every matter raised, but I am sure we both wish to thank the staff who supported you, and the civil servants who supported me. I have no idea whether I will be back seeking their support again, or indeed whether I will return to my position as spokesman for the House of Commons Commission, but they do sterling work for us and support us effectively.

I want to start, as others have, by thanking your family. We all know, as politicians, that our families are often on the frontline. They do not see enough of us
and when they do, it is not exactly quality time that they get with us, so I hope that you will spend very valuable time with them in the future. I remember, as one of the highlights of being in this place, attending one of the events you organised in the Speaker’s House and your children coming in to kiss daddy goodnight. I remember that and often use it as an anecdote when I am doing my best to entertain people.

I want to commend you for your commitment to modernising this place. Many people have referred to some of the initiatives you have spearheaded, whether proxy voting, the Youth Parliament, the education service or the much greater frequency with which urgent questions are heard in this place. I would like to commend you for improving the diversity among staff and making the House of Commons a place where hopefully anyone will feel comfortable working, including our excellent Chaplain, Rose, who has served us so well.

As one of the House of Commons Commission members, I want to draw attention to the work you have done in pushing through the restoration and renewal project. That is something that needs to move forward. The mother of all Parliaments is at real risk of simply collapsing around our ears. The role you have played in making sure that the restoration and renewal project proceeds will certainly rest as one of your legacies in this place.

Finally, and I think perhaps most importantly, I would like to commend you for ensuring that this Parliament is not an encumbrance to be trampled upon, but a sovereign Parliament proud and resolute in standing up for the rights of our constituents and the people of the United Kingdom. From the Liberal Democrat Benches, I wish you a very bright and positive future.

Mr Speaker: Thank the right hon. Gentleman very warmly for that. We have worked together for a long time.

11.56 am

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Thank you, Mr Speaker, for calling me, for once, quite early on in proceedings and not “saving the good doctor” for tail-end Charlie. [Laughter.] One of the disadvantages, it must be said, of having originally met you 15 years before we both entered the House in 1997, is the fact that you have, from time to time, felt it incumbent upon yourself to demonstrate that you were showing no particular favouritism to a personal friend by not calling me perhaps as early as I would have liked.

I was impressed that the shadow Leader of the House referred to our 10-year period training up Conservative activists—I think 600 in all—before we entered the House of Commons together in 1997. At that time, I used to do the campaigning part of the course and you used to do the oratorical part of the course. You used to say that in a good speech the speaker should have, at best, one key point and at most two key points to convey to the audience. So, my one key point about you, your character and your speakership is that you have shown that you are a good man to have by one’s side when the going gets rough. That does not just apply to individuals; it applied to Parliament as a whole, because when you came into office in 2009 the going was very rough indeed.

You made your entry into Parliament in a somewhat dramatic way as the MP for Buckingham. Such were your skills as an orator during the selection process, you had been shortlisted for not only Buckingham but the Surrey Heath constituency. You were due to be in the semi-final in Surrey Heath and in the final in Buckingham on the same night. You will recall that, at my suggestion, we organised a helicopter to enable you to go from one interview to the other, so that you would not have to withdraw. I know that you have felt for many years a great deal of gratitude towards me for making that possible. I have to tell you that that gratitude was entirely misplaced, because I knew that only a few days later, the process of selecting for New Forest East was going to begin, and we were both on the longlist. [Laughter.] I thought, “If I can’t get this blighter selected, I’m not going to have a chance,” so it worked out as a win-win situation.

It has often been remarked, and has been again today, that you went on a political journey, but the detail of that political journey has not always been spelt out as clearly as it should be. There is a myth out there that the young Bercow was part of the Monday club, had very right-wing views, and then saw the light and repudiated them all. It is with great pleasure, therefore, that I remind the House that on 2 December 1997, when we had both been elected and there was a Second Reading debate on the treaty of Amsterdam, I was making only my fourth speech from the Benches of the House of Commons and you—chuntering from a sedentary position—kept heckling me on why it was that I was such a Johnny-come-lately to the cause of ardent Euroscepticism. Some people may wish that some journeys had been rather shorter than they turned out to be.

I will not detain the House much longer, other than to make a couple of closing points. I am still waiting for the dinner that I earned in a bet with a young female Conservative MP—now a Minister. I am delighted to say—when she made a bet with me that you would not last one year as Speaker without being ejected. And I observe that now, finally—at last—freed from the constraints of the speakership, you will feel able to speak your mind and not hold back your views so self-effacingly.

On a more serious note, but a heartfelt one, as well as thanking you for your personal friendship over many years, I am sure that you will agree that it would be nice to close this tribute to you with a personal tribute that I would like to make to the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd). She has been here for 35 years, and in all that time, she has never ceased to promote human rights at home and abroad. From the opposite side of the Chamber, I salute her as I salute you, Mr Speaker.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. I completely endorse what the right hon. Gentleman just said about the right hon. Lady, who has been fearless, principled and insistent on speaking up for the rights of people around the world when those rights have been egregiously abused. If ever there has been, in this Parliament, a voice for the voiceless, she has been that voice.

H on. Members: Hear, hear!

12.3 pm

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): On a personal note, Mr Speaker, you know that I met you before you were a Member of Parliament, and I can
remember what an irritating young man you were at that time. [Laughter.] You were clever, and you knew it, and a bit arrogant with it, and you wanted to tell me just how right you were on every political issue—this is before you were in Parliament. Over the years, I have got to know and like you a great deal, and I hope that I can count you as a friend. You actually like my ties, which is something that recommends you to me.

When I chaired the Education Committee, I remember that you asked me to come to your constituency, and then much later you asked whether you could come to Huddersfield to see what sort of constituency I represented. I have told the House this before. I met you at Wakefield station. You got off the train and said, “It’s a hell of a long way, isn’t it?” Of course it is—it is nearly 200 miles to Huddersfield. We had a fantastic day together. I think you have learned a great deal from going to people’s constituencies and finding out what the journeys are like and how vulnerable we are when we are travelling. I think you woke up to that on that day and have been such a good influence ever since—remember this was just after Jo Cox was murdered. It was also the day after the referendum, so it was an auspicious occasion.

On a more personal note, you know I have a large family: three daughters, a son and 12 grandchildren. A few years ago, we were wondering what to do on Boxing Day. We were all down in London for a big reunion and thought we would go to London Zoo. Of course, the favourite place to go was the penguin pool, and who did we find there? You, your wife and your children. It gave a flavour of you as the great family person we all know you are. We love that you and Sally have been living here with your family. The kids seem to have grown up really wonderfully even in this strange environment. I congratulate you on all that.

You are very easy to get on with, and you are a very good friend, so may I have the privilege of giving you some careers advice? I give a lot of careers advice. I am told it is one of the things I am quite good at: helping people to identify their talents and moving them on a bit. Now, I did not realise that you are a very good manager. I recall the dark days in this place before you became Speaker. It just needed management. From those early days, you built up a great team of people around you. It was not easy, but you made changes in a place that was desperately badly managed. We had inherited a crazy system, but you came in and transformed the management of this place. I think we will look back on the Bercow years as great years for Parliament. It is more efficient and sensitive in so many areas—families, children, women and diversity—and you will be remembered for all that, but you will also be remembered for bringing this place back to life. We were in deep trouble and you helped us to save it and led that saving process.

I want to repeat something I said earlier about what you went through at a certain stage in your career and how the press treated you—not just the red tops, but The Times, The Daily Telegraph, people who used to be MPs. Political sketch writers used to be funny—not some of those who hounded you. We know who they are. They stimulated on social media some ghastly stuff that you and your family had to put up with, and I am proud that you stood up to it. It didn’t get you down and you are still here, a robust champion of everything you did.

The careers advice comes now. You are still very young. I hope to be re-elected as the Member for Huddersfield, and if I am successful, I will miss you, but you are only in your mid-50s, I think, which is just the time to start a brilliant new career. I won’t talk about Frank Sinatra. His voice, though I loved it, had gone by then. You are in the prime of your life and I see you making a contribution greater even than the one you have made up to now. I say to the Leader of the House: it would be an absolute insult to the House if the tradition that the Speaker is offered a seat in the House of Lords was not respected. I was worried this week when the Prime Minister failed to pay a warm tribute to the Father of the House. I hope that that kind of pettiness will not go to a repudiation of a long tradition that our Speaker, when he retires from this place, is offered a place in the House of Lords.

Even if that happened, Mr Speaker, you have your talent—that of mimicry, your voices and all that stuff. Yesterday, I was phoned by ABC, which said, “Would your Speaker be interested in doing a programme? We love him in America.” I said, “No, we want him to have a brand new television programme about politics called ‘Order, Order!’” So, Mr Speaker, I want you to stay in politics, do a really good job on the media and bring that to life in the way that you have brought this place to life. But whatever you decide, Godspeed.

Mr Speaker: I am extraordinarily grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I am conscious that these exchanges have become very lengthy, and there is other business with which the House has to deal. That is not a criticism of anybody. People have spoken genuinely from the heart, and I appreciate that, but if we are to accommodate colleagues and then get on to the very important business of tributes to the Reverend Rose, which must happen, and in the most fulsome terms, perhaps a little self-discipline would assist us.

12.10 pm

Robert Halfon (Harlow) (Con): You will be aware, Mr Speaker, that it was recently announced that we are being given a new hospital in Harlow, one of six to be built—in the early stages—in the country. I mention that because much of it is down to you. You gave me five debates. You allowed me to ask questions. You helped me when I came to you to say that this was a very important issue in my constituency. That example is recent, but it is one of many throughout my time in the House since 2010. What is not known in the media is how often you help MPs who have real constituency issues to make their case to the Government, and I think that the Leader of the House mentioned that.

You have been unfailingly kind to me, and unfailingly helpful whenever I needed to support the people of my constituency. Whatever may happen at the general election, much of what I have been able to do is down to you, and the people of Harlow owe you a debt for what you have enabled me to do in my role as MP. I thank you for your constant kindness to me over the last few years. I will never forget it, and I wish you every possible success in the future.

Mr Speaker: I am grateful to the right hon. Gentleman.
12.12 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I do not use many words, but I want to say to you, Mr Speaker, that I cannot imagine this place without you. I have been here a very long time now, as the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis) and my hon. Friend the Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) know. When it was difficult for women to get into politics, my Friend helped me to become the MEP for Mid and West Wales, and I thank him for that. I have disagreed with the right hon. Member for New Forest East, particularly on defence matters over the years, but I still look on him as a friend.

As for you, Mr Speaker, the BBC, apparently, has a particular tribute to you. It talks about your catchphrase, “the traditional cry of Commons speakers through the centuries... ‘Order!’”, often elongated and twisted into an extraordinary sound that is all his own.

To mark his retirement, the BBC has analysed 100 years of Hansard—the official Parliamentary record—to discover just how different he was to any previous occupant of the chair.

The first thing we discovered is that he has said “Order!” nearly 14,000 times. I think that must be a record, but it “is just the beginning of the Bercow story in statistics.”

I want to thank you in particular, Mr Speaker, on behalf of those of us in this place who are older. There is a place for older people in this Parliament. Sometimes we are not able to jump to our feet quite as fast as we used to when we first came here 35 years ago. I am grateful that, when I had a new knee, you allowed me to sit down but still get in on questions. Thank you for that.

Thank you also for understanding people’s weaknesses and strengths in this place. I have sat here since 1984—I cannot count under how many Speakers, but it is quite a number—and you, in my view, have been the best, because you have given us Back Benchers, in particular, the opportunity to get in on questions, urgent questions, statements and all the rest. Sometimes it has been difficult to catch your eye, although I usually wear a red coat. However, I quite understand that, and I feel grateful to you for opening up this Parliament to everybody, which many of my hon. Friends have mentioned. That is particularly the case with Speaker’s House. People from outside who have come here have been amazed by how accessible you have been to the public.

You have been particularly nice to children. My nieces and nephews wrote to you after being here. They wanted to know what you have for breakfast; you had some conversation with them about food. They were very young and kept asking me that question, so I said, “Why don’t you write and ask him?” I think they got an answer as well.

Thank you for everything. Thank you for being such a good human being. You were very active before you were Speaker, particularly on human rights, so I hope you will continue to be the voice for people who need your help all over the world. I am sure you will be, because that is your natural instinct.

Diolch yn fawr, Llefarydd—thank you, Mr Speaker. Welsh is my first language; I spoke my first few words here in Welsh. Thank you very much from all of us. I will not say happy retirement. I do not like the word “retirement” because those of us who want to keep on talking will, I am sure, use every opportunity to do so.

12.17 pm

Sir Christopher Chope (Christchurch) (Con): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd). In so doing, may I thank her for her exemplary public service over so many years?

The hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) referred to career advice. I can remember, Mr Speaker, that you once asked me, at one of these meetings of potential Conservative candidates, whether I could give you some advice as to how you might become a proper parliamentary candidate selected in a constituency. The advice I gave you, which you followed, was that you should get married. That just reminds us, does it not, of how times have changed?

You and I have been friends for many years. I had the privilege of nominating you for the Conservative party candidates list at a time when our views were very similar. Indeed, one of your qualifications then was that you regarded, as did I, Enoch Powell as a schoolboy hero. I think that in more recent weeks, you have been following the advice that Enoch gave. I had the privilege of serving with him on the—[Interruption.] Yes, back in 1984 this was. Enoch Powell was on the Procedure Committee, and he gave advice to us that, in the absence of a written constitution, the procedures of the House are our constitution. That is something that you have taken very much to heart over recent weeks and months, Mr Speaker. I hope that nothing that has happened in that period will cause pressure to build for a written constitution, because that would deprive us of those flexibilities.

You have obviously been a really good servant for Back Benchers. You have also always had your finger on the pulse. I will give just one example of that. Back in 2010, after the coalition Government were elected, there was an announcement that the Government were going to bring in a measure which had not been in the manifestos of either of the two coalition parties: to change the prerogative powers of the Prime Minister to call a general election. You, with your finger on the pulse, chose me to secure the first Adjournment debate of that Parliament on the subject of the Dissolution of Parliament. The debate, which I think went on for about an hour and a half, was an opportunity for new Members and old to hold the Government to account for their extraordinary announcement, which at that stage was for a threshold of 55% in order to trigger an election. We asked questions such as, “55% of what?” On that occasion, Mr Speaker, you showed your perspicacity regarding which issues were going to be—and indeed still are—important.

You were fantastic, Mr Speaker, when we had the presidency of the Parliamentary Assembly of the Council of Europe. You went out of your way to impress our colleagues across the other 46 countries that belong to the Parliamentary Assembly, and then you stood up for those of us in this House who found ourselves being arbitrarily removed from membership of the Parliamentary Assembly because we had had the temerity to vote against the Government’s attempts to try to rig the referendum by suspending the rules of purdah. Your intervention caused the Government to be put into the naughty corner. As a result, a few years later, those of us who had been removed from the Parliamentary
Assembly were reinstated. I thank you for that and for your fantastic service to this place and to democracy over so many years.

**Mr Speaker:** Thank you. I really appreciate what the hon. Gentleman has said. We have known each other for 35 years and I richly appreciate his words.

**12.21 pm**

**Chris Bryant** (Rhondda) (Lab): I do not think that the Leader of the House should be so shy today. He is an innovator—we have now had a statement that has become a debate. That has never happened before in the history of Parliament, so he is a great innovator and we look forward to his many more innovations.

I want to pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd). Tony Blair never managed to say that correctly; according to him, it was always “Sinon Valley”. I first met her on a trip long before I was a Member of Parliament. She was already a doughty figure in the Labour movement when we went to Chile many years ago. As many Members have said, she has stood up for human rights—and for that matter sat down for human rights in Tower colliery. I know that her constituents, and mine in the Rhondda too, for that matter, have a great deal of respect for her.

As for you, Mr Speaker, I hope that you remember Tom Harris. Tom was not the left-wing of Labour MPs. Indeed, on one occasion in the Tea Room, when he was trying to say that he was a leftie, I said to him, “Tom, the only vaguely left-wing thing about you is that you quite like the gays”—he decided he would have that on his tombstone one day.

It is not often that I speak solely about the LGBT issue, but I think it has been an essential part of your journey, Mr Speaker. There have been occasions when Speaker’s House has felt a bit like a gay bar night after night, which is wonderful, because change has come so quickly in this country, as has acceptance and diversity. You have played a very important part in that.

The main reason why I wanted to speak is that I want to say a very specific thank you. For centuries, as hon. Members will know, Members of Parliament and their very close relatives have been allowed to get married in St Mary Undercroft. Many have taken advantage of that and it has been a great delight to them. Of course, that was never available to gay MPs, and it still is not because of the rules of the Church of England. I fully understand that, although I did have to persuade Richard Harries, the former Bishop of Oxford, that he could not marry me, first because canon law did not allow it and also because the law of the land did not allow it.

When it was mooted that we should be able to find somewhere in the Palace of Westminster where gay and lesbian MPs would be able to form their civil partnerships, you, Mr Speaker, were the first person who leapt forward and said that you would do everything in your power to try to make it happen. I know this to be the case because you rang Chris Mullin to ask him what he thought about it. Chris Mullin has always been a very liberal-minded chap—he is always in favour of the modern world, diversity and so on—and he was very friendly to me and my partner, Jared Cranney, but I happen to know, because it is Chris Mullin’s published diaries, that he said that he thought that civil partnerships in the Palace of Westminster would be a step too far at that time. But you ploughed on, Mr Speaker, and what was particularly nice was that opening up the Palace to allowing civil partnerships meant that any member of the public could form a civil partnership in the Palace. We have now made that possible for several hundreds of people. I understand, which is a great delight.

I particularly remember Harriet—if you don’t mind my calling the Mother of the House that—that chatting to Cilla Black, Sally, Pat Brunker and lots of other women from the Rhondda Labour party, with copious quantities of champagne and everyone enjoying themselves enormously. We were the first civil partnership in Parliament, and that was entirely down to you, Mr Speaker.

**Mr Speaker:** I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. I think it was on Saturday 27 March 2010. I remember it extremely well and it was a very happy occasion. It brought no harm to anyone, but it brought much happiness.

**12.26 pm**

**Philip Davies** (Shipley) (Con): As you know, Mr Speaker, I did not vote for you to become the Speaker when you were elected in 2009, and I am sure you will recall that I spent about an hour with you, sitting down at a table over a cup of tea and explaining all the reasons why I was not going to vote for you to become Speaker. I think that it is also fair to say, Mr Speaker, that we have had our disagreements, particularly on the decisions you have made over Brexit in recent times; I do not think that will come as a great shock to anybody either in the House or outside the House, but we have always conducted those conversations in perfectly civil terms.

Mr Speaker, you have always been immensely kind to me in my time in the House of Commons, not least during the preparations for our wedding—mine and Esther’s—next year, about which you have been especially kind. I must at this point pay tribute to Rose, the chaplain—an inspired appointment by you, Mr Speaker—who has been equally amazingly kind to me and Esther, and indeed is so kind that she has offered to come back to conduct the service even after she has left, which is a mark of her as a person and which is very special for both me and Esther; we are very privileged that that has been the case. That was an inspired appointment by you, Mr Speaker, and you have been incredibly kind.

However, Mr Speaker, I think and hope you will be most remembered for your support for Back Benchers. As you know, I am a permanent Back Bench, Mr Speaker, so this is more important to me than anybody else; as I always say, the one thing that the Prime Minister and I always agree about is that I should be on the Back Benches. You have always been a champion of Back Benchers, to allow everybody’s opinion, whatever it is, to be heard in the Chamber, and I have always been immensely grateful for that.

Some people have very short memories, but I remember when I first entered Parliament in 2005 in Question Times we barely got beyond Question 6 or 7 on the Order Paper and at Prime Minister’s questions those with a question after Question 10 had no chance of being called, to the great irritation of many colleagues who had spent ages trying to get on the Order Paper for Prime Minister’s questions only to find that they could.
I think we can be sure about that.

Gentleman. He and I will continue to have curry together: not just to us here, but to those outside. making the House seem feel more relevant and inclusive, visibility of that diversity has gone a long way towards in senior and significant positions in the House, and the proxy vote for colleagues who are benefiting from that incredible work, often behind the scenes, to secure a inclusion since very soon after I was elected, and I am your Speaker’s Committee on equality, diversity and have done. It has indeed been an honour to serve on second to none in the House. I know how much you spirits in his final months.

father wishing him good health was a huge boost to his our last family tea downstairs; and your letter to my were going through extremely difficult times, notably say that he, too, wants to extend his best wishes and his and I thank you for that.

House and do my duty on behalf of my constituents, towards giving me the confidence to stand up in the when everything is so confusing. It went a long way them in the House at a very daunting time for them, towards giving me the confidence to stand up in the House and do my duty on behalf of my constituents, and I thank you for that.

May I also say thank you on behalf of my family? My brother Sundeep in Australia has just texted me to say that he, too, wants to extend his best wishes and his thanks to you, particularly for your support when we were going through extremely difficult times, notably the illness and death of my father. You were accommodating when I had to leave before a debate ended; you came to our last family tea downstairs; and your letter to my father wishing him good health was a huge boost to his spirits in his final months.

Your commitment to equality and wellbeing has been second to none in the House. I know how much you have done. It has indeed been an honour to serve on your Speaker’s Committee on equality, diversity and inclusion since very soon after I was elected, and I am grateful for the opportunity to do so. You have done incredible work, often behind the scenes, to secure a proxy vote for colleagues who are benefiting from that now. You have been committed to increasing diversity in senior and significant positions in the House, and the visibility of that diversity has gone a long way towards making the House seem feel more relevant and inclusive, not just to us here, but to those outside.

Penny Mordaunt (Portsmouth North) (Con): Will the hon. Lady give way?

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): These are responses to a statement.

Mr Speaker, your work on the Education Centre has been extraordinary. You are an agent of change, and you set a standard for how to push the boundaries to achieve the reform and revitalisation that are so desperately needed, no matter what the organisation. I also thank you on behalf of my constituents, because I know that hundreds, if not thousands, have been through the Education Centre. Young people, many of primary school age, have been able to experience the House and build a connection with a place that is their House and is fighting for their future, too. I have no doubt that future parliamentarians, and indeed future Speakers, will embark on their roles in public life as a result of their experiences of our fantastic Education Centre and all who work in it.

You have opened up Speaker’s House, where we have held events such as National Sikh Awareness and History Month. Indeed, you hosted an event marking the first anniversary of the launch of a project in Hounslow, Hounslow’s Promise, which seeks to advance the educational attainment, social mobility and employability of our young people.

I also pay tribute to you for your defence of this House and our democracy. This is a House that is a beacon of democracy across the world. Its integrity and its reputation as a national institution go beyond us as individuals and must never be taken for granted. It is indeed for each of us to protect and safeguard the House, because it is our democracy that keeps our nation safe.

You have led us through unbearable times—events that have stunned the nation, such as the terror attack on Parliament and the murder of our dear friend Jo Cox. You have also seen us through the unconventional but extremely important and peaceful unveiling, on a Saturday, of her coat of arms here behind us, by her husband and her children. I was honoured to be here that day, along with local councillors Adriana Gheorghe, Candice Atterton and Samia Chaudhary, and others who came to support the family at that time and to remember Jo.

In the Chamber, Mr Speaker, you have been tough and fair when that has been needed for either Front or Back Benchers, but you have also been generous when that has been needed. You have, for instance, been generous in respect of urgent constituency matters—including events such as the life, and then the death, of young Charlie Gard from my constituency—and, indeed, in respect of policy matters such as those relating to young offenders in Feltham young offenders institution. You have allowed us to raise those issues at moments of great importance, and I am grateful to you, as are my constituents, for the times when that has made the difference.

Mr Speaker, you have touched the lives of hundreds of thousands who have walked through the doors of this place. You are loved by many across the House, political friend and foe alike, and you will be deeply missed. I know, however, that this will not be the end of a sterling career and that whatever you do next will be a great contribution to our democracy and to our country. I am excited, as well as intrigued, about what it might be.
for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman), but I have been thinking a lot about this. At first I thought that perhaps you could be the host of the Radio 4 programme “Just a Minute”, but from your experience can you imagine no deviation, hesitation or repetition? No chance!

Then I thought of a programme of my childhood, which older Members may recall: you may recall it, Mr Speaker, and the Leader of the House may as well. I thought that there might be a remake of the programme “Call My Bluff”. You could be the Frank Muir character. Let me explain for the benefit of younger Members that each of the members of one panel would give a definition of an English word—most of the people listening would have no idea what it meant—and the others had to decide which version of was correct. “Chunter” is a good example, and now you have made it into a household word, Mr Speaker. It can be a verb, an adverb, a noun—almost anything.

You are the only Speaker who has been in the post during my time in the House, and I think that you have been a very fair, very decent and very honourable Speaker. Given the nonsense that you have put up with—here, in the press and everywhere else—it is to your credit that you have seen your way through it all. Your system, Mr Speaker, is based on what my children and my former employees have called my system: parenting and management by sarcasm. I think you should be very proud of that, because you have taken it to a new level. Sarcasm can be used as a way to control 650 people—as well as my children and my former employees.

You have fans everywhere, Mr Speaker. My mother has a large photograph of you on her mantelpiece at home, and I am continually asked, “Why can’t you be like John Bercow?” Harriet Rainbow in my office, the doyenne of the Watford parliamentary office, is also a big fan.

Every time I have stood up to speak in the Chamber, I have said, “Thank you, Mr Speaker”—so I will finish by saying, “Thank you, Mr Speaker.”

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is extraordinarily generous. He has talked about employees, and as well as being a very diligent Member of Parliament, he has employed a lot of people over the years. As his mum knows very well, before he came into this House he was an extremely successful business person. That is something that I have never been. There are lots of things I have never been, and I have never been a successful business person. I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he has said and for the way in which he has said it.

12.39 pm

Ian Mearns (Gateshead) (Lab): For the very last time: I am grateful to you for calling me to speak, Mr Speaker. It has been a real pleasure to work under your speakership for the past nine and a half years. My right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) stole a little piece of my thunder by mentioning the fact that the BBC reported this morning that you had used the term “Order, order” no fewer than just under 14,000 times. Maybe you are fortunate in one way, because you might not have achieved that record, had we been living through less interesting political times. Those interesting times were exemplified two Saturdays ago when we assembled here in this Chamber for Prayers and your Chaplain used the words, “be not anxious”. A nervous giggle ran around the House, and I thought that that was a moment to treasure because it captured the mood of the House, and the mood of the country, in the light of the political position we are currently in.

Mr Speaker, you have been a true champion of Back Benchers for the entire duration of my nine and a half years’ tenure in this House. For nine of those years, I have served as a member of the Backbench Business Committee, and for the past four and a half years, I have been Chair of that Committee. Sir, you have been a champion not just of Back Benchers but of the role of the Backbench Business Committee, which came into being when I first entered the House. Through your speakership, the Committee has allowed Members across the House to air issues of vital importance to their constituents across the whole United Kingdom. You have been a true champion of their capacity and ability to do that. You have allowed us as Back Benchers to hold the Executive to account.

On behalf of my elder sister, I also want to thank you for pronouncing my name correctly. I think we had a little lesson about that in a curry house not too far away from this very establishment. It has been a pleasure to work under your speakership, and I wish you a very long and happy next stage of your career.

12.42 pm

Sir Henry Bellingham (North West Norfolk) (Con): May I please ask for your indulgence, Mr Speaker? I have to go and chair a debate in Westminster Hall, but I should like, initially, to pay tribute to the Speaker’s Chaplain. Bishop Rose has been an inspiration to us all, and one of the great joys of having an early question on the Order Paper has been to come into Prayers and hear the uplifting, spiritual and wholly Christian way in which she conducts Prayers.

When I came back into the House in 2001, after a short absence courtesy of an ungrateful electorate, you and I became friends, Mr Speaker. In fact, we always happened to sit near each other in the Chamber, on the third row back, quite near where the hon. Member for Huddersfield (Mr Sheerman) now sits. You always gave me good advice. I had been in the House a few years before that, but the House had changed a great deal. At that stage, you were, at different times, shadow Chief Secretary to the Treasury and shadow Secretary of State for International Development. We had some very interesting discussions. In fact, you were so robust that you made me look like an old-fashioned Tory wet and a moderniser. You also taught me something else. Whenever you jumped up to try to catch the Speaker’s eye, you had a habit of giving the back of the Bench in front a loud, firm kick. I will not try to demonstrate that now. It always worked, because Speaker Martin would look up, see you and call you to speak. On one occasion, when I was trying to get called, you were sitting next to me but not trying to get called. I started kicking the Bench in front, but Speaker Martin called you, even though you were not standing.

Philip Davies: You were one of the few people he knew, Mr Speaker.

Sir Henry Bellingham: Well, that is certainly not a fault with you, Mr Speaker. Your memory and recollection of every single name and detail regarding every colleague is beyond extraordinary.
[Sir Henry Bellingham]

I have spent the last fortnight or so on the Speaker election hustings. The candidates have not agreed on everything, but one thing that all nine of us have agreed on is that you have done the most superb job for Back Benches. You have done this through the urgent question revolution, through Back-Bench debates and through calling colleagues to speak when you know that they have a particular constituency interest.

We also agree that what you have done for outreach, for children and for schools has been transformational. In the past, when school parties came down from Norfolk, they would meet me in Central Lobby and we would struggle to find a Committee Room and there was nowhere to go for a cup of coffee. Now, they can go to the Jubilee Café and to the new Education Centre, and it is a completely different experience, thanks to you. You have made the lives of those children much more fulfilling in terms of their understanding of democracy than was ever the case before.

I entirely agree with the Leader of the House that you look out for colleagues who have individual constituency cases. When there is a real issue, you come to the rescue of those colleagues and help them to get justice and some form of satisfaction for their constituents. The hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) and I were both on the HS2 Select Committee, and during that inquiry we spent a lot of time going along the route of HS2. That included a number of days in your constituency. Mr Speaker, where we had meetings with action groups and residents in communities and villages. One of the things that struck me—and, I am sure, the hon. Member for Gateshead—was that, whenever you arrived at a meeting of distraught village residents, you not only knew the name of every single one of them, but you knew everything there was to know about the village. You were the local MP who was on their side, and you were admired and respected in a way that few of us were admired and respected in a way that few of us

Mr Speaker: I thank you for the way in which you have helped me look out for colleagues who have individual constituency cases. When there is a real issue, you come to the rescue of those colleagues and help them to get justice and some form of satisfaction for their constituents. The hon. Member for Gateshead (Ian Mearns) and I were both on the HS2 Select Committee, and during that inquiry we spent a lot of time going along the route of HS2. That included a number of days in your constituency. Mr Speaker, where we had meetings with action groups and residents in communities and villages. One of the things that struck me—and, I am sure, the hon. Member for Gateshead—was that, whenever you arrived at a meeting of distraught village residents, you not only knew the name of every single one of them, but you knew everything there was to know about the village. You were the local MP who was on their side, and you were admired and respected in a way that few of us could aspire to achieve. You were able to do that in spite of also carrying out your duties here as Speaker.

I thank you for the way in which you have helped me on a lot of different issues, to do with my constituency and elsewise, both in my capacity as a Minister and as a Back Bencher. You can leave this place confident and secure in the knowledge that you are leaving behind a powerful, special and long-lasting legacy.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he has said.

12.47 pm

Diana Johnson (Kingston upon Hull North) (Lab): I should like to carry on this theme about names. When I was selected as a candidate, my constituency neighbour, John Prescott, seemed to have a problem with my name. He kept calling me Melanie. Then, when I got to the House of Commons, the then Speaker seemed to have a problem with my name as well, because he referred to me as Jaccui. So I am delighted that you have never had a problem with my name, Mr Speaker. You have always called me Diana, for which I am very grateful.

First, I want to thank you on behalf of the children of Hull, because through the Hull Children’s University, so many of them have been able to visit Parliament and to use the Education Centre, which I know is very dear to your heart. Huddersfield is a long way from Westminster, but Hull is even further, so this is a great tribute to your commitment to ensuring that this place is accessible to children from all around the country. I also want to thank you on behalf of the Youth Parliament for the work you have done to support those budding politicians and for inviting them into this Chamber and overseeing their proceedings.

I personally would like to thank you for the kindness you have shown me when I have come to you with illness or adversity. You have always been a very decent, kind man, and I very much appreciate that.

Your use of urgent questions has been remarked on by many in the House today. I think I probably have the record for the number of urgent questions you have granted to any Back Bencher, and they have been on the issue of contaminated blood. I know that the community who have been infected and affected by that awful scandal in the NHS hold you in very high esteem and regard for allowing parliamentarians to pursue the Government of the day and to seek justice for what happened to them. I want to say a very big thank you on behalf of that group.

You have also been innovative with urgent questions. I remember coming to speak to you when the Church of England made the ridiculous decision not to allow women bishops, and I asked you what Parliament could do to make the Church of England think again. You advised me that, although it had never happened before, an urgent question could be submitted to bring the Second Church Estates Commissioner to the House to answer for the Church of England, so a big thank you for that. I am delighted that we have one of the women bishops in the Church of England with us today.

You have always been a great champion of women’s rights, particularly on sensitive issues such as abortion. You have allowed debate in this Chamber on issues that people find difficult and sensitive. The way that you have allowed debates to take place, particularly on the issue in Northern Ireland, has been really important. My hon. Friend the Member for Walthamstow (Stella Creasy) is a doughty champion of women’s rights, and I know that she holds you in high regard.

I am going to miss you, and I send you every good wish for whatever it is you go on to do. Whatever it is, it will be an enormous success, but we will miss you.

12.51 pm

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): I can exclusively reveal that the tactic of kicking the Bench in order to be called works, Mr Speaker. I start by echoing the opening words of the Leader of the House about what you have done to revolutionise the work of the education service. The way that it now brings children of all ages through this place and introduces them to Parliament is phenomenal. I also pay tribute to what you did with the Youth Parliament. I was lucky enough to be the Minister with responsibility for the Youth Parliament, and I stood at the Dispatch Box, with the shadow Leader of the House opposite me, to make the opening statement. I found it really quite intimidating, and the quality of debate in the Youth Parliament was incredible, so I thank you for bringing that through here.

I want to make my own personal tribute to the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd). I do not know her particularly well, but I hold her in great
esteem and shall miss her and, indeed, the many experienced colleagues who are leaving this place. Young whippersnappers like myself need wise counsel from those who have been here for many years. I am grateful that we in Kent have my right hon. Friend the Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), who gave all new MPs elected in 2010 templates for what he does to help us in dealing with our constituents. I know full well that if I have a difficult piece of casework, there are Members across the House who have seen it all before and to whom we can go for advice.

I have known you for what I thought was a long time, Mr Speaker, but we have never been for a curry, so perhaps we do not know each other as well as I thought. However, a few weeks ago, I said to Mr Speaker that I had fallen out of love with the Chamber in recent months. It has been an incredibly challenging time in Parliament, and I just was not feeling like I was here or that I really valued what we do. Mr Speaker has been kind enough to call me on a regular basis over the past couple of weeks for questions and interventions and so on, and I have fallen back in love with this Chamber. I thank you, Mr Speaker, for giving me the confidence to move from the Front Bench to the Back Benches and feel like I can make a positive contribution in a debate. I am genuinely grateful to you.

I do not know whether colleagues are aware of this, but in all good bookstores there is now a book called “Be More Bercow”. It is an excellent book—

Dr Julian Lewis: Did he write it?

Tracey Crouch: Mr Speaker did not write it but, like some other hon. Members, I have had him sign a couple of copies for auction. The book has quotes that he has said over many years and then, on the next page, some self-help. For example, as we have heard Mr Speaker say many times, “Calm down man”—a quote that will follow you around for some time—may be on one page, and then there will be a mindfulness lesson about how to breathe properly in order to calm yourself down. We can all learn from elements of “Be More Bercow” but one lesson that is not in there is how not to go to the toilet for over nine hours. Mr Speaker, you have the bladder of a camel. Had you not announced your retirement, we ought to have thought about reinstating the commode that was under the Speaker’s Chair once upon a time.

You are an extraordinary character, Mr Speaker, and I have sat here since 9.30 am listening to some incredible tributes to you, but it is about time that I offered some of my own. I am grateful for your support at that most difficult period in my life when I was working on the period poverty campaign, one of the best of us. As an example of their humanity, when I was working on the period poverty campaign, one of those gentlemen to whom I just referred approached me in the corridor one day with a carrier bag. He had gone out and bought loads of women’s sanitary products, and he said, “Will you donate these to somebody in need? I have never done this before. I have never gone into a supermarket or a chemist and bought these items.” I just thought that was really touching.

Mr Speaker, your humanity and personal touch will never be forgotten. They have been in evidence on some specific occasions, but none more so than when we lost Jo. The next day, you came to Birstall, which is next door to my Dewsbury constituency, and you did not just turn up and lay flowers, but you stayed and talked and empathised with local residents and then went on to the local church and spent time there. It was so appreciated—not just the gesture of being there, but your authenticity and just spending time with local people who were feeling that loss so much. Equally, after the dreadful terrorist incident here a couple of years ago, when we lost such a wonderful police officer and it was such a traumatic time for so many of us, you were not only typically stoic, but very supportive as well. The same has been true in the past few months, which at times has been a difficult period for me, particularly with some of the abuse that I have received, as have other Members, particularly female Members. You called me at home one Sunday morning to ask whether I was okay, because I had received a particularly unpleasant death threat—all death threats are unpleasant but I had received something that was particularly unkind. I was very grateful for your support at that time.

You are an extraordinary man, Mr Speaker. I will miss you hugely. I wish you and your family every happiness. I had the pleasure of chatting to them last week, and your delightful young daughter Jemima is an absolute credit to you and Sally. I look forward to reading your memoirs, and I particularly look forward
to seeing you in sequins in a future episode of “Strictly Come Dancing”. Thank you, above all, for your kindness, Mr Speaker.

1 pm

Mr Iain Duncan Smith (Chingford and Woodford Green) (Con): First, I want to apologise for not having been here at the beginning of these tributes, Mr Speaker. I had to engage in a podcast with the Father of the House. It was a joint podcast. I say that, but he took up at least 90% of it, so it was joint in the sense that it is joint whenever you sit to hear him and you ask him to speak briefly and he does exactly that!

At the outset, I also want to say a farewell to you, Mr Speaker. We have known each other for a significant amount of time. I believe you once referred to me as a “sea green incorruptible”. You may or may not recall that. I am not sure to this day quite what you meant by it, but I had been rebelling against the Government then for some time and I fancy that you thought that was a good thing. It was on the back of that that when I became leader I employed you in the shadow Cabinet, as shadow Chief Secretary. It was not altogether a happy period. I recall being approached by one particular colleague of ours, who will remain nameless but who upbraided me in the Lobby, saying “It is fantastic that you have got somebody who is really campaigning on the rights for gay people and out there speaking on all these subjects. I was thinking, “Oh, very good, thank you.” He then said, “Do you think we could have a shadow Chief Secretary when you next get to the appointments for the shadow Cabinet?” I think he was not altogether enamoured of your journey, but it was certainly a journey, one that you have taken personal ownership of. You have been part of changes that have come about, all of which have been overdue. I fancy that your legacy in this matter will also therefore be recorded by everybody, notwithstanding your period in the Chair.

On that note, I wish briefly to deal with the idea of legacy. I recall a quote from “Julius Caesar”:

“The evil that men do lives after them;"

“The good is oft interred with their bones”.

I wish to reverse that process and simply say that there is much that you have done in this House that will stand the test of time and will return this House, in a way, to what it probably was many, many decades before, before it became too subjected to the concept of the overarching power of the Executive. I was a little tongue in cheek there. When I was, unexpectedly, in the Cabinet for six years, I regularly used to curse you in the mornings at about 9 o’clock when I heard that you were about to grant an urgent question—I think such questions came at noon—and I had to give you some reason why we should not have the UQ. Almost invariably I was told by your office that you had read what I had put but not required that it was the case and had granted the UQ. During that period, I do not think any Minister would not have been frustrated, annoyed and angry. However, having returned to the Back Benches, I have to congratulate you on reinvigorating the UQ, turning it from being an unusual event to being a very standard one, and I hope I have taken advantage of that. Of course the Government do not like that. When one is in government, surrounded by all the decisions one has to take and things one has to do, coming back to the House and being forced to answer questions is a nuisance, but it is a nuisance that really does matter.

I recall being frustrated as a junior Back Bencher on many occasions because I could not get in on a question and I thought that I had been pushed to one side, that everybody senior had got in and that the usual rules had applied. Any Member coming in here now will not have any knowledge of how it was before and they will just be used to standing and getting called. I often say to such Members, “It was very different in the old days. You might stand for three separate questions not related to each other and still not get called. Eventually you would approach the Chair and the Chair would say, ‘Next time we will call you. And you would then argue, ‘Well, I may not have an interest in the next question” but you would still have to come in and stand. Banishing that and getting rid of that process will stand as an important legacy of yours, because it allows non-Privy Counsellors to get their word in. I have one word of slight advice: my general rule is that in this place after about an hour there is absolutely nothing that anybody is going to get up to say that has not already been said at least three or four times. You have been incredibly tolerant that even on the fifth time it is worth hearing and sometimes quite important.

In that regard, your use of this place and your reforms of this place were overdue. I also remind colleagues that you came in at a difficult time; this House was in shame. The expenses scandal was all that people in the country saw and thought of us in this place. They thought all of us were corrupt and involved only for our own sakes, which is completely untrue but was overwhelmingly the view. As you know, Mr Speaker, people come here because they genuinely believe that they want to do good and to try to improve the quality of life for their constituents and for citizens around the country. To some degree, we are still suffering from that view. We needed the reforms such as opening this place up, letting younger people come here, using the education service and expanding that process, and giving colleagues the power to bring Governments to the Dispatch Box so that they could ask those questions and force Ministers, even in difficult moments, to answer the most difficult questions of the day. That is a set of vital reforms and I cannot see any future Speaker reversing them, nor should they, because they are absolutely structural.

We have not always agreed on everything, Mr Speaker, nor should we; I confess there have been times when I have been somewhat frustrated. However, as colleagues have said, this is not really about being frustrated about the decisions; it is about whether or not somebody is consistent in the process they engage in. The one thing you have been absolutely consistent in is your belief that Back Benchers have the right and should have the power to be heard, regardless of whether you agree with them or not, and of whether they sometimes say things that might be an abhorrence. You believe that they have the right, because they were elected to this place, to be heard here without fear or favour. Restoring that process will be your greatest legacy, so I wish you a good retirement—although I have a feeling I will see you around a bit, and you will have some other kind of career. Perhaps you will be speaking across the States, where I gather you are becoming quite a celebrity on the speaking
circuit. Whatever else you do, I know you will bring to it longer speeches, with words that nobody has ever understood or heard before. Notwithstanding that, people will be fascinated by them, as I have always been by your approach at the Chair. So I wish you the very best of fortune, and I consider it in a way a privilege to have been in this House when these reforms have taken place, and you were the architect of them. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much indeed.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: I get the opportunity for the second time today to call Thangam Debbonaire.

1.8 pm

Thangam Debbonaire (Bristol West) (Lab): I want to thank you, Mr Speaker, on behalf of three groups of people. As other Members have mentioned, the schoolchildren who have been through the Education Centre, thanks to you, have been inspired by that experience. I echo the tribute on that that others have paid to you.

There are two other groups, and one of them is my constituents. You have a lot of fans in Bristol West, so if ever you feel like popping down, you will get a warm welcome. Many of them have asked me to pass on to you their admiration and to tell you that they have been glued to the television over the past year. It is an interesting by-product of where we have been politically that people text me to say, “What’s that funny thing you do when you bow at the table?” You have facilitated that sort of interest.

This is a slightly quirky one, but I want to thank you on behalf of the very unofficial parliamentary string quartet, the Statutory Instruments. It was in your Speaker’s palace at a Christmas celebration last year that Emily Benn and I first hatched the plot. We were enjoying the Christmas tree, and I think probably some Christmas carols and possibly some mince pies. I will always be grateful to you for being there at the birth of the parliamentary string quartet, and then at its first performance. Every time we play, we will be thinking of you. We are a little bit thwarted, because we were supposed to play at a concert for the Archbishop of Canterbury on 12 December but I gather we are doing something else on that day. Nevertheless, the Statutory Instruments are grateful to you.

Other people have said this, but I feel I must add that you and Reverend Rose—I cannot be here for her tribute—have been here for us at our darkest hours, as well as our moments of joy and celebration. Those dark moments been very dark indeed: June 2016 in particular and, as my hon. Friend the Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) mentioned, the murder of PC Keith Palmer. There have been other times as well. You have been here for us and it has been incredible. It is a source of great support and comfort, both spiritual and non-spiritual, that the two of you have given to us as individuals, and to me as a Whip.

Your views on Whips are well known, Mr Speaker. Despite what has been said about your views on Whips, I have always known you to be really rather kind and helpful to us. I have sat in Whips’ corner for three years now—I cannot believe it has been three years, but I think my Chief Whip will confirm that I have been an Opposition Whip for three years—and you have been extraordinary. I have learned such a lot from working by your side and also, of course, from Peter, Ian and Jim, to whom I also owe a great debt of thanks. I hope they will not be leaving us, even if you are.

The Leader of the House could perhaps have cleared up a mystery for us. He said that to him the word “modernisation” is an expletive; if that is so, I am slightly perplexed as to why he has not taken this opportunity to confirm that your 10 years of public service will be rewarded in the traditional manner. I think it would be courteous if somebody on the Treasury Bench could clear up that mystery for us at some point in the not-too-distant future. I think the traditional time to do that would be today.

Mr Rees-Mogg indicated dissent.

Thangam Debbonaire: The Leader of the House is shaking his head at me, but I do think that somebody ought to clear it up. Nevertheless, I know that whatever it is that you go on to do, Mr Speaker, you will do it, I hope, billowed up on a cloud of love and admiration from us all, and with the great enjoyment and collegiate spirit that you have shown to us and, I hope, we have shown to you. Some of the greatest and the darkest moments in my four years here have been enhanced by your presence in the Chair, including a tiny little thing involving a packet of peanuts and an Order Paper that I think will best be left to my memoirs or yours. Yes, you know what I mean.

Thank you, Mr Speaker, and good luck.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

1.13 pm

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Time does not allow me to do justice to all the amazing work that you have done in the service of this Parliament, Mr Speaker. Before I came to Parliament, I was a young barrister, and I was told, “Brevity is a virtue, not a vice, so keep it short.” You have applied that rule when we have all spoken.

I wish to cover three things: accessibility; the way you have treated Back-Bench Members of Parliament; and wellbeing. First, on accessibility, all Members of Parliament are among equals in this place, and you have applied that rule. As a young Member of Parliament, many years ago, when I thought I needed to talk to the Speaker, I contacted the Speaker’s office and said, “I would like to speak to the Speaker of Parliament.” I was told, “Thank you, Mr Chishti,” and within minutes the Speaker could be reached on his mobile phone in his constituency. I thank you, Mr Speaker, and the brilliant team around you—I see one of them standing there, and there are others. Members of Parliament judge the moment when they need to speak to our Speaker—you are our Speaker—and accessibility is key for Members of Parliament and for anyone when they want to reach a person in a position of responsibility. You, Mr Speaker, has always ensured that.

Secondly, Mr Speaker, you have been the champion of Back-Bench Members of Parliament. We all have our own cases. One thing on which I can never compromise
Mr Speaker, every step that you have taken has been for the betterment of this Parliament. Thank you, Sir.

In 2014, I wrote to you, Mr Speaker, to ask for an Adjournment debate on the abuse of blasphemy laws in Pakistan, where they are used to target minority faiths, and the case of Asia Bibi, who was on death row. Before the case came up in the media in the past year, I wrote to you, Mr Speaker, and you gave me the chance to raise it on the Floor of the House. And it was not just then, because you know what matters to Members of Parliament. We all champion different issues, and you have been absolutely brilliant in realising what issues matter to Members of Parliament. When I resigned from the Government in November 2018—the Government did not agree with my view on the Asia Bibi case, so I stepped aside—I wanted to question the Prime Minister at Prime Minister’s questions, but I was not listed on the Order Paper. I was sitting on the Bench right there, and although I am slightly short, I was still bobbing up and down. You, Mr Speaker, called me so that I could raise my issue with the person who had to make the final decision. You have been absolutely amazing as a champion of Back-Bench Members of Parliament.

Thirdly, there are some outside who do not see Members of Parliament or those who work here as fellow human beings. We are all human beings, and we all suffer from the same challenges that every other citizen in our great country suffers. We all have challenges and issues that arise. I wish to touch on the work that you, Mr Speaker, have done on the wellbeing of Members of Parliament and of those who work in this great Parliament. I cannot thank you enough for the way you have dealt with those issues with compassion, decency and complete regard to human dignity. You have put in place a system with the brilliant Dr Madan. It is a clinician-led approach, and I thank Dr Madan, because often those who do the work behind the scenes do not get the credit. They do an amazing job. If everyone applied your approach, Mr Speaker, of making sure that those who work here, at whatever level, get support when they need it—and quickly, swiftly and appropriately—individuals could go on and be better than before. That comes down to individuals in responsibility taking such decisions.

I was very fortunate to represent the Prime Minister in the Holy See at the canonisation of Cardinal Newman. I did not know much about Cardinal Newman, but when I was there I listened to people speak about that great man’s values. One of the hymns was “Lead, Kindly Light”, which has the lyrics:

“I do not ask to see

The distant scene; one step enough for me.”

In the 10 years for which you have sat in the Chair, Mr Speaker, every step that you have taken has been for the betterment of this Parliament. Thank you, Sir.

Mr Speaker: Thank you.

Clive Efford (Eltham) (Lab): I listened carefully to the opening statement by the Leader of the House and was interested to hear what he had to say. I always listen to him carefully. He chooses his words carefully and gives me the impression, at least, that he understands the meaning of them—after all, he is the only person I know who reads the words “lounge suit” inside his jacket and takes them as instructions for use. You, Mr Speaker, have challenged the House in respect of the rights of Back Benchers. There are people in the House who have benefited from that at times but who, now that time has moved on, perhaps do not quite appreciate how you have stood up for the rights of this House and for those of us who have wanted to stand up for our constituents.

In particular, I want to pay tribute to you for standing up for the people of the 48% who voted in 2016 to remain in the European Union. If people had listened to the Government’s views on the outcome of the referendum, which we all respect, they would have believed that it was a resounding victory, and that the country was not split at that time. But, indeed, the country was split, and it was for this House to stand up and hold the Government to account and to speak up for the views of those people who wanted to remain in the European Union, or who wanted, in leaving, to retain as much of our relationship with the European Union as we could. Without your strength of character, Mr Speaker, to stand up to an Executive who were prepared to try to ride roughshod over those of us who wanted to hold the Government to account, we would have been in a very different place now. That is a tribute to you, and your actions during these very trying times have earned you a place in history. You deserve enormous credit for that. I will always admire you for what you did, because, at times, it was very difficult for you. You were there as an individual having to stand up to those people. I understand that you have an excellent team around you, but you did it none the less, and you did it for us. For that, I will always be grateful.

I am also grateful to your team. I do not do this very often, but I pleaded with them to ensure that I was called at Prime Minister’s questions to raise something on behalf of a disabled constituent who had had their personal independence payment taken away, and was about to have their car repossessed on the Thursday after that Prime Minister’s questions. I did not think that I would be called, Mr Speaker, but because you had been generous with time at Prime Minister’s questions—you allowed it to overrun—I was called right at the tail end. I always seem to get called at the tail end, but if you are patient, you get there. I thanked you, Mr Speaker, when I was interviewed on the radio subsequently about this issue. As a consequence of my being able to raise that matter at Prime Minister’s questions—because you heard my plea and called me—the life of my constituent was completely transformed in a moment. That is the power of being in that Chair, and I pay tribute to you for how you stood up for us Back Benchers so that we could stand up for our constituents. My constituent’s PIP was reinstated and they did not have their car repossessed.

Your inspired appointment of Rose Hudson-Wilkin was, again, a testament to your strength of character, and to your determination to modernise and to take us forward as a House of Commons, representing all the
people. I pay tribute to Rose. She has an amazing career ahead of her and will be a very influential person in our society in whatever role she goes on to do when she ceases to be Chaplain to the Speaker of the House.

Mr Speaker, you came into the House in 1997, the same time as me. You have a constituency in the home county that I have one in London. No doubt schools from your constituency have frequently visited this place and you have taken them round on tours. But on rainy days, when they wanted to have their packed lunch, children used to be told that the Speaker of the House and the Serjeant at Arms did not allow packed lunches to be eaten in Westminster Hall. There was no cafeteria down there, and when we got one, it was not accessible to schoolchildren, because they had to buy something to be in there. This was an appalling place for young people to visit in terms of how they were welcomed, although they were awestruck as they were taken around the place and no doubt educated by all the MPs who were boring them to tears with the details of the House. None the less, it was important that they were here. They were inspired by the House, but it was very unwelcoming to them.

The changes that you have made in opening up the Education Centre and making this place feel welcoming to young people have been inspired. I want the Speaker who follows you to do more of that, and it is a mark of the way that you have brought modernisation and change to this House. You have earned your place in the history of this House and I wish you all the best for your future.

Mr Speaker: Bless you, Clive. Thank you very much indeed.

1.24 pm

Andrew Rosindell (Romford) (Con): Mr Speaker, it is a pleasure to pay tribute to you today. I have known you for the best part of 30 years, and I echo everything that has been said in the Chamber today. I will not repeat those tributes, but instead add to them by saying things that have not been said.

I thank you for your patriotism, for being an upholder of tradition and for being a lover of your country. You are a patriot. The Mother of the House said that you were politically correct, but on those issues you have never been politically correct. It was you, Sir, who supported the long-running campaign to ensure that the flag of our country was flown from the Victoria Tower every single day of the year. Members will recall that it used to be flown only when the House was sitting. In the early part of 2010, the House agreed, with your support, Mr Speaker—a statement was made in the House—that the flag would fly permanently, 365 days of the year. That is, I think, a mark of the pride in our country and it is appreciated by many.

It is also you, Mr Speaker, who has upheld the tradition of St George's day for England. When we celebrate our traditions for England, Speaker's House has been opened to the Royal Society of St George and to organisations that celebrate our English heritage. I thank you, Sir, for allowing the St George’s day organisations to come to Speaker’s House to celebrate 23 April.

I also remember that it was you, Mr Speaker, who allowed the tradition—the sad tradition—of crests of MPs who have been assassinated and murdered to be displayed in this Chamber. For a very long time, the crest of Airey Neave was in the Chamber, but the previous Speaker was not in favour of additional crests. You may recall, Mr Speaker, that Lord Howe of Aberavon and I came to see you and asked whether we could have a crest in memory of the late Ian Gow, who was murdered. You were very supportive of that, and that led to crests being put up not only for the late Ian Gow, but for Dr Robert Bradford, Jo Cox, Sir Anthony Berry and others who were killed by Irish terrorists. It was you, Mr Speaker, who allowed that tradition to be reinstated so that we could remember Members of Parliament who were so cruelly taken from us by assassination and political murder.

The diamond jubilee of Her Majesty the Queen was a great celebration for the whole of Parliament, but it was Mr Speaker who opened Speaker's House for a wonderful celebration for representatives of all Her Majesty's realms and territories. Indeed, how can we forget the renaming of the Clock Tower as the Elizabeth Tower? There are many things that you will be remembered and thanked for, Mr Speaker, but from my personal point of view, it will be your kindness, your friendship, your understanding, your willingness to deal with issues as they arose, and your being on the side of Back Benchers who need a voice—you have always made sure that we have had that voice.

Mr Speaker, you have been a wonderful champion of the Mother of Parliaments, and I believe that you will be remembered for many years to come.

1.28 pm

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): May I start by saying what an honour it is to sit next to my right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) who will be sadly missed? I completely associate myself with the remarks that were made by the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis).

I want to say something rather different, Mr Speaker. I want to take you back to a trip that we made together to Sudan. I know that you agreed to go at quite short notice: we needed a Conservative Member and you agreed to come on that trip. I had never been to Sudan—and this was pre-secession—without getting unwell. When we say that someone looks green, we are usually greatly exaggerating, but I can assure Members that, when we flew round on that trip, I looked at you and you were green—you were absolutely unwell—but you carried on and we got to Nyala, which was, at that time, the heart of the struggle for Darfur. As we got there, all the lights went out, but it was wonderful because our hosts said, “Don’t worry, we’ll go to the local takeaway and get you something to eat.” I remember that we had not had anything to eat all day; we probably did not want anything. I am a vegetarian and could not eat the food that they brought back, and I am eternally grateful to you for being there, because you did eat it.

The great tribute that our hosts paid us was that we were to share the President’s bedroom, so you and I went to the President’s bedroom—and that was fine. But we were then able to take advantage of using the President’s toilet. Now, I do not know whether or not it was a Sudanese tradition, but the President’s toilet had previously been used. And I now know why you are
such a steadfast Speaker, able to sit in the Chair for nine hours. It is because you and I decided that it was one ask too many to use the President's toilet, and waited. Dare I say that the constitution of this Speaker was built in that President's palace in Nyala?

People do not realise that making such trips—visiting the trouble spots of the world—is part of our role and responsibility. You did that, and I hope that you will do so in the future, because you will be welcomed and admired. People will see you not only as the former Speaker—unlike in the States, where people are always referred to as Congressmen and Senators, even when they are no longer in office. It has been an honour to call you a friend, and that trip will always stand in my memory even though I have been a number of times.

That since "Erskine May" has been available online, I have been reading it in bed every night. Indeed, I was that "Erskine May" has been available online, I have been reading it in bed every night. Indeed, I was following up on a point I made earlier in the week, to get an answer from the Leader of the House—if he wants to give one—on whether the Government would allow a future debate on Huawei and the importance of 5G, but I am very happy to ignore that request if you feel that it would be inappropriate at this moment.

Mr Speaker: No, no—I said to the hon. Gentleman that he could raise what he wanted to raise with the Leader of the House.

Mr Seely: That is very kind of you, Sir, because I fear that I might—not for the first time—have misunderstood the Order Paper. However, it will make you happy to know that since "Erskine May" has been available online, I have been reading it in bed every night. Indeed, I was going to raise a point of order to ask why paragraph 12 of chapter 20 consisted of not one paragraph but two, but the Whips advised me against it; I think it was during the Saturday sitting and we were all very keen to get away.

Mr Speaker, your support for Back Benchers is always important and incredibly welcome, and your calling Ministers to account is excellent because scrutiny always strengthens. Any good Minister always appreciates being called for an urgent question, because it gives them the chance to explain the Government's position. If a Minister is happy to explain the Government's position, they are confident of the Government's position. And if they are not, there should be questions about why they fear being called. I thank you for that, and I hope that the tradition of UQs will continue under all future Speakers; it is very important that it does.

Likewise, the Education Centre has been superb. The excellent teacher at Ryde Academy on my Island often brings the kids down. In fact, the most trying interviews that I have are often with primary and secondary schoolchildren from my Island, who test me and my knowledge as best they can. Long may that continue.

Some of my constituents have specifically written to me to say how much they will miss you, but specifically to say that they will miss you chastising me. One of them told me that so frequent has that reprimanding and guidance become that they regularly look forward to my being told off by you on a regular—indeed, almost weekly—basis. You have brought joy to many people—occasionally to myself, but very often to my constituents, especially if you have been teasing me.

On the point of persist, persist, persist—if the Leader of the House has a chance to answer—5G is very significant issue, and there is very little public and parliamentary debate about it. What can we do about it, and can we have debate before decisions are made so that we can give our opinion and say what we think the options are?

Mr Speaker: That was extremely gracious of the hon. Gentleman, whom I have known for a very long time. I thank him for what he said, and I know the Leader of the House will want to respond to him.

Mr Rees-Mogg: As this is a statement, I probably should have been replying to everything, but I think, in the broad context, it was better not to have done. But 5G is of course a matter of concern and one that the Government take very seriously, and the security and resilience of the UK's telecom networks are of the greatest importance. I obviously cannot promise debates at the moment, because we will have Dissolution on Wednesday, but the general election is coming up and I have a feeling that this is a matter that will be of interest to many people, who will want to ensure that we have a safe and secure system. The Government have not yet made a decision on the matter, and that is an important point to underline. In spite of press reports to the contrary, a decision will be made in due course. I think that a wide debate among the British public is the best thing that we can have; we should always trust the people.

1.36 pm

Martin Whitfield (East Lothian) (Lab): I do not intend to speak for too long because some wonderful compliments have been paid, and it is sometimes hard to sit and listen to people complimenting you—that is very human. I would just like to say thank you. Thank you for the first handshake and words when I took my oath; the lovely note after my first speech; and the tea morning for the new entrants held by Rose and yourself in your chambers. I also thank you and your staff for the huge help that you have given with regard to Grace's Sign and the Any Disability symbol, and for the J. P. Mackintosh lecture that took place in Speaker's House, which was gratefully received by his family and the people of East Lothian. For all that and so much more, thank you.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman.
1.37 pm

**Tom Tugendhat** (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): Mr Speaker, I can see that you are saving the best till last. It is a huge pleasure to say thank you this afternoon. I wonder, though, whether when we bump into each other again in years to come, I will feel as I did that time I jumped off my bicycle and a man 6 feet taller than I looked at me and said, “Hello, sir. I notice you haven't polished your shoes today.” It was the academy sergeant-major from Sandhurst and I was wearing trainers. He was pointing out what he knew then, which is that standards matter, and you have defended the standards in this House religiously. For that, I can only be extremely grateful.

Defending the rights of parliamentarians is not actually about defending 650 people who may or may not have an opinion on a subject. It is about defending the very principle of democracy in our country. It is about defending the very principles of freedom of thought, freedom of expression and individual liberty. And it is absolutely about defending the foundations of the economy and society that we have built with much care and many failures, but over many, many decades. For that, I am hugely grateful.

On a personal basis, if I may, there is another thing for which I would like to thank you. You have not only introduced us to a wonderful chaplain, who is here and to whom I pay huge personal thanks and tributes, but you have also introduced a new chaplain in Father Pat Browne. To have a Catholic chaplain in this House and to have a regular mass on a Wednesday afternoon is an act of extreme kindness to many of us in the Catholic community in this place, but it also reflects the fact that this House does not now legislate for the exclusion of one religion, does not now silence one form of worship and does not now reject the individual practice of so many people in these islands.

I know that you have been on a journey, Mr Speaker. Some people have spoken of your origins on one wing of the party, and your arrival at the seat in which you now find yourself—the defender of many liberties, which would have surprised others 20 or 30 years ago. Many of us have been on a journey. I see the Leader of the House, the hon. Member for Strangford, who has often been the conscience of many in this Chamber with regard to human rights issues. When she has spoken here on human rights issues, I have been more than pleased to join her in those opportunities to speak out and speak up for those across the world who do not have a voice. We in this House are very privileged to be the voice for them.

When I came here as a new Member in 2010, Mr Speaker, as I said earlier, I was just a tad nervous and maybe a wee bit apprehensive. I never, ever thought that I would be in the House of Commons. It was a dream, perhaps, but not something I really thought would happen in my life, and it did. I vividly remember meeting you. You shook my hand with a very welcoming and generous introduction. At once, I felt the warmth that you exuded then and you exude now, and that put me at ease in this House. I was not put at ease when I made my maiden speech, because I was as nervous as can be about that, but once I had got that speech over with, I realised that you could do it.

As I learned the rules and regulations of the House under your guidance, Mr Speaker, you occasionally chastised me, always rightfully and always justly. I found out that the word “you” can only be used for your good self. I am not quite sure whether I have learned that yet, but I am trying hard and I will endeavour to do so over the next period.

As the Back-Bench champion that you are, Mr Speaker, we in this House, and I, have felt that our views would always have an opportunity to be heard. To quote you, the voice of Strangford must and will be heard. It was heard in this House, and we thank you for that.

Your choice of Speaker’s Chaplain, which we will have a chance to refer to in a few moments—I wish to do that as well—was right and appropriate, as was your choice of the Serjeant at Arms. I supported both those choices. I thank you for all your team’s support. Peter, Ian and Jim are always kind and courteous and undoubtedly a great team.

Behind every great man—and I believe, Mr Speaker, you are a great man—is a great woman. You have been very blessed and very privileged to have at your side, as your wife, Sally. Her support for you was and is vital. I thank Sally and the children for the support they give you. I know myself how important it is to have a family behind you to give the support that you need.

I believe that the future for you, Mr Speaker, will be successful; it will be incredible. I am a great believer, as you know, in the power of prayer, and always have been. Your chaplain will know that as well. I believe that with prayer we can move mountains. Every morning I pray for you, Mr Speaker, and I will continue to do so in the time when you are not in that Chair and have moved on to other jobs. You will not be forgotten in this House, certainly not by me. I will miss you, not least for Adjournment debates that you and I shared on many occasions. Not having you present will be a minus for me, but I hope that there will be someone else there who can take your place.

I want to thank you, Mr Speaker, for your kindness, for your friendliness and for the wise guidance that you have given to me and many others in this House. I wish...
without any idea, I suppose I will have to compete on equal terms.

1.31 pm

Mr Speaker: The hon. Lady does not have to thank me at all. It has been a great privilege, as in respect of many years ago—perhaps when you were in a different place politically, but we will put that aside.

Mr Speaker: I am almost beyond words. I am indifferent, irrepressible abilities.

1.36 pm

Mr Speaker: Thank you very much.

1.49 pm

Rosie Duffield (Canterbury) (Lab): First, I need to say that I will not be here for the tributes to the chaplain, but the House’s loss is Canterbury’s gain, and I am thrilled that I will get to see much more of Rose Hudson-Wilkin in my constituency; that is brilliant.

Mr Speaker, it is so difficult to put into words what seeing you in the Chair means to people like me on the Back Benches. Some of the speeches today have been incredibly moving. I need to find a new word for kindness, because when we look at today’s Hansard, that is the word that will come up the most.

I do not know how to express my gratitude for how immensely patient and lovely you have been; I do not want to get too emotional. My father has Alzheimer’s, and his recent memories are not that great, but he will never forget and never stops talking about the day that I was sworn in and how kind you were to my very ordinary family, who had never set foot in a place like this. You made an effort to wave to them and mention them, and my dad was talking about it even yesterday, when we were at a family funeral. It meant a great deal to him and my family, and that is something I will never forget.

When those of us here—especially women and Back Benchers—who are pretty terrified of this experience get up and talk about things that are personal and make us vulnerable, we can stand here and look at you, and you are a bit like a lighthouse in a stormy sea. During the speech that I made recently, when I felt very vulnerable, you kept me going. I just kept concentrating on you, you are a bit like a lighthouse in a stormy sea.

Mr Speaker: How will you manage when John goes?” I said, “I think I will manage.”

1.51 pm

Craig Mackinlay (South Thanet) (Con): Mr Speaker, this is a very special day for you. I was not going to speak, but I want to put on record a couple of my times with you.

As I mentioned to you on shaking your hand when I took up my place here in 2015, we had a tea together many years ago—perhaps when you were in a different place politically, but we will put that aside.

There is one kindness you have given me. You have earned me a few pennies while I have been in the House. I am not always the first to be called or the last, but I
have earned many a good coin from my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen), because we often have a little bet as to who will be up last. I am grateful to you for adding to my wealth and dettracting from the wealth of my hon. Friend.

I had a very difficult experience at the end of last year and the beginning of this year, which you took a great interest in throughout. The day after my acquittal, there were business questions. I came to speak to you at the Chair, to tell you that I had rather more to say than is appropriate at business questions. You allowed me, on that very special day for me, the opportunity to explain in far more minutes than one would usually allow for business questions what I had been through and the annoyance thereof.

There is lots that I have not agreed with you on over the last few years, but I will never forget your fairness to me and to others in the House who face difficulties. That was an opportunity to put on record in this great international public space what I had been through and the annoyance that I felt. I thank you for that occasion probably more than for any other since my time in the House, and I wish you every great success in the future, a long life and much happiness.

Mr Speaker: That is extremely gracious of the hon. Gentleman, and I thank him from the bottom of my heart.

1.54 pm

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): The hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess)—the great city of Southend—was right when he said that today is a day when the House comes together to say a fond farewell. There are so many to whom we can say a fond farewell. Indeed, some of them are in the Chamber: my right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) and my hon. Friend the Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham). I want to add to a fond farewell to the remarkable right hon. Member for Meriden (Dame Caroline Spelman). She is a truly outstanding parliamentary who was prepared to put the national interest over narrow party political interest. She is lionised by Jaguar workers and Land Rover workers, as we have worked together to defend the interests of our manufacturing base against the background of Brexit. She will be sorely missed.

Mr Speaker, yours has been a remarkable trajectory, from being a member of an organisation so right-wing that even Norman Tebbit abolished it, to being a fully paid-up Macmillanite, to I know not where. I know not where because you do not wear your politics or your prejudices on your sleeve. You are truly impartial.

In 600 years of our parliamentary democracy, there have been few champions of Parliament as great as you, writing a noble chapter in the history of Parliament and, crucially, enabling Parliament to hold the Executive to account. That may sometimes be frustrating for those on the Treasury Bench. There have been times when the right hon. Member for Downton Abbey, the Leader of the House, has expressed his concerns and frustrations, but you have allowed Parliament to hold the Executive to account. You have done that without suffering the fate of some of your predecessors, who literally lost their heads.

You have been a great champion of parliamentarians. There is no question about it: our country is deeply divided. Sadly we see a politics of hate on the march, sometimes manifested in attacks on parliamentarians. You have been a champion of parliamentarians, including on that front. You have also been a champion of reaching out to the country. In troubled times, you have truly been a bridge over troubled waters.

You have been a champion of opening up Parliament. You have built a brilliant team, including the wonderful Rose, reflecting the rich diversity of our capital city and our country. You have also been a champion of opening up Parliament to young people. I will never forget your powerful addresses at the four Erdington Youth Parliaments. I remember meeting a group of apprentices from the Erdington Skills Centre the week after, and one of them said, “That bloke Bercow, he’s really something, isn’t he?” As a consequence of what you have done, tens of thousands of young people have come to the cradle of our democracy, and they have loved every moment.

You have a remarkable, Shakespearean turn of phrase and a rhetorical flourish the like of which I have never heard. You are also humble, reaching out to those suffering difficulties in their life or in their career in Parliament. So many Members here today will never forget your kindness when kindness was desperately needed.

You are not just one of Parliament’s greatest Speakers, who in centuries to come will be remembered like some of the great figures of the past. You are a profound family man, but also—forgive me for saying this—you are just a plain, decent man. We will never, ever forget you.

Mr Speaker: I am immensely obliged to the hon. Gentleman. I have told him many times how much I appreciate his support, and I do so again in the public square this afternoon. Thank you.

1.58 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): Mr Speaker, before turning to you, I want to make one point. There has been unconfimed bad news about my constituent Amelia Bambridge. Everyone wished that she would be found alive and well. I ask that people use sensitivity and common sense and avoid circulating distressing images.

May I say, Mr Speaker, as technically the longest-serving Conservative Member of Parliament, although the Father of the House properly holds that title, that all of us, from me to the most recent person elected to this House, acknowledge all the good that you have done and the good that has been done while you have been Speaker?

I have to warn those who want to write you off in retirement, Mr Speaker, that in 1656 Cromwell found out that a unicameral Parliament was a bad idea and he created the Other House. Those at the time could not decide on the title, which is why we use the expression “the other House” for the House of Lords. In the last 363 to 361 years, we have relied on some of the words that Speaker Lenthall used. He actually went from this Chamber to the Other House and then came back as Speaker, and that course is open to you if you want to break precedent in more ways than you have already.
When a decision was taken in the Chair by you, Mr Speaker, I submitted to the Clerks an early-day motion giving a direction that it should not happen again. They, I think humorously—I assume it was humorously—asked me how I could do that. I said, “What are the only words people can remember of a previous Speaker?” The answer was Lenthall’s words that he could only do as the House “directs”. If that is true, putting down a motion to give a direction to the occupant of the Chair would seem perfectly proper and the motion was accepted.

I want to say, Mr Speaker, that although you were not my first choice in the year that you were elected as Speaker, I honour you. I praise Sir George Young for asking you, and you agreeing that he could have his party in your House. I think that shows the mood and the friendship that exist in this place, and that has continued strongly with you as Speaker.

I explained to my constituents that had they chosen you rather than me in Worthing West in 1996, they could have been represented by the Speaker for the last 10 years. When one of them said that your tenure of 10 years seemed rather longer than the nine years, I said, “He did say he was going after nine years, and 10 years is after nine years, isn’t it?” If any pedant uses the word you actually put in your letter, I shall criticise them for being too pernickety.

I have dragged you to the Chair twice, Mr Speaker. We do not have to drag you out of it because you have chosen the time to leave. As people heard me say privately a year ago, I think you deserve a margin of appreciation. Those who would want to make a great fuss about the time you have been in the Chair are wrong. However, at some calm period, we may wish to discuss whether the normal expectation should be that the Speaker will do up to nine years, as you had once indicated.

It would also be a useful idea if we could have a debate, in some period of calm, about whether we should have a regular discussion—perhaps every two years—on the way the Chair is occupied and how decisions are made. It is one of the areas where we can contribute, and the occupant of the Chair and the Procedure Committee can consider whether anything can be done.

There are a few things that people do not know about what you do, Mr Speaker, but it is worth mentioning the one referred to by my hon. Friend the Member for North West Norfolk (Sir Henry Bellingham) about your relationship with your own constituents. During the Select Committee considering objections to HS2, we went around with you on a number of occasions, and I think people who only see you in public will not know what you are like in private with your constituents. The Speaker is knowledgeable, he is calm, he is reasonably quiet and people trust him. That is what people can ask of their Members of Parliament, and the service you have given to them should be remembered in these tributes today.

There are other things I could say, but I think the best thing to do is to say that the good you have done should be remembered—and you have acknowledged the good that we have done—and were there to be a signal honour motion, we hope that it would be passed with acclamation. Thank you, Mr Speaker, for occupying the Chair.

2.3 pm

Mr Speaker: Let me thank the hon. Gentleman who has made the concluding contribution from the Back Benches, and in thanking him I want to register the view that, in addition to all his other attributes, the hon. Gentleman is a gentleman. What he has said is very much appreciated by me, and it will not be forgotten.

I do want to thank colleagues. This is quite an embarrassing experience, and people watching may think it bizarre or surreal, but it is a procedure that very often takes place. It was opened with considered élan, style and good humour by the Leader of the House. The right hon. Gentleman always places a premium on the Chamber and regards his overriding duty to be in it whenever possible. If that was true as a Back Bencher, it is true almost in triplicate for the holder of a designated office, and most assuredly it is true for this holder of the office of Leader of the House when business to which he is speaking is involved. Notwithstanding that fact, I do think that the right hon. Gentleman deserves some appreciation for staying from the very start to the very close of this series of exchanges—it has been genuine and sincere, but also long—so I thank the Leader of the House very much.

I would like to thank all colleagues—all colleagues—who have spoken. They do not owe me anything, but I thank them for what they have said. [Interruption. ] The right hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns), who is on the Treasury Bench, says, “And those who can’t speak”. He and I have known each other a long time, and I told him outside the Chamber the other day how impressed I was by the way in which he had conducted himself at the Dispatch Box. Anybody would have thought that he had been a Minister for many years, as opposed to being virtually an ingénue, but I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his sedentary chunter.
Standards

2.5 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): I beg to move,

That this House—

(1) approves the First Report of the Committee on Standards, Keith Vaz; HC 93;

(2) endorses the recommendations in paragraphs 99 and 101; and

(3) accordingly suspends Keith Vaz from the service of the House for a period of 6 months.

Today’s motion follows the publication of the first report of the Committee on Standards of this Session on the conduct of the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz). I have been asked to say that he cannot be here today to listen to this because he is currently in hospital. The report was agreed by the Standards Committee following a process of investigation and consideration by recognised due process, and it was published on Monday 28 October. The Government have sought to schedule a debate as quickly as possible, as is the usual practice.

It is always regrettable when a motion such as this is before the House. The matter before us today has been investigated by the Parliamentary Commissioner for Standards, and it has now been reported on by the Committee on Standards. I thank the former commissioner, Kathryn Hudson, and the current commissioner, Kathryn Stone, for their work. I also thank the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), the Chairman of the Committee on Standards, and the other members of the Committee for their work in producing this report.

The motion approves the report of the Committee on Standards, endorses the recommendation of the Committee and proposes that the right hon. Member for Leicester East be suspended from the service of the House for a period of six months. I commend this motion to the House.

2.7 pm

Mr Nicholas Brown (Newcastle upon Tyne East) (Lab): I am replying for the Opposition, Mr Speaker. Before I do so, however, may I say to you, Sir, that I want to identify myself with absolutely everything my right hon. Friend the shadow Leader of the House said in tribute to you. You have been an outstanding Speaker, and you deserve the gratitude of us all. I know that to be praised by the Opposition Chief Whip will probably not help your standing with your colleagues, but let us face it—just between the two of us—it is probably too late to make amends. I can truthfully say, Mr Speaker, that nobody is going to miss you more than I am.

To turn to the matter at hand, this is a sad day for us and for me personally, because I am friends with the right hon. Member who is criticised. However, we accept the report, we accept the findings and we accept the recommendations in full. I want to say thank you to my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) for chairing the hearings and to both commissioners who have conducted the investigation. I also want to thank the Committee, and particularly the lay members of the Committee. The introduction of the laity into affairs of this kind was controversial, but it seems to be working well. On behalf of my party, I certainly accept the report—and the obvious consequences—in full.

Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I beg to move,

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Andrew Bridgen (North West Leicestershire) (Con): I beg to move,
I have read the report, and there is no apology from the right hon. Member for Leicester East. There is no hint of apology, no hint of regret, and a complete denial of the unanimous conclusions of the Committee on Standards. That may hint at his state of mind—he is in complete denial about the level of dissatisfaction that the public feel with the behaviour of some Members of this House, and he has certainly detracted from our reputation.

Many tributes have been paid to you today, Mr Speaker, and I wish to add my own. If you had acted on the letter that I wrote to you in September 2015—a year before the incident involving the then Chair of the Home Affairs Committee—in which I raised my concerns that if the actions and activities of the right hon. Gentleman came to light, they would risk seriously damaging—

Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman will resume his seat. This matter was raised on a previous occasion and I am going to say, in all solemnity and with firmness, to the hon. Gentleman and to the House what the position is.

I could not have known that the hon. Gentleman intended to use this debate in the way that he has thus far—in an orderly fashion, but in a way that I could not have predicted. I certainly could not have anticipated, and the hon. Gentleman did not do me the courtesy of telling me, that he intended to address my reaction to these matters, but I will say to the House that I do recall—I do not have the detail in front of me—the hon. Gentleman writing to me highlighting his concerns about the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) and imploring me to act. I indicated to the hon. Gentleman, in terms, that both on the basis of my own knowledge, I say to the House, of the role and responsibility of the Chair, and on the strength of the professional advice of the Clerk of the House, that it was not—not—for me to intervene in any way, shape or form.

The premise upon which the request by the hon. Gentleman for me to intervene was based was entirely—I emphasise the word “entirely”—misplaced. It is not for the Speaker to get involved in the study of, or investigation into, complaints that are made about individual Members of Parliament. It is not for the Speaker to perform a second job as a kind of night-time Columbo looking into matters that one Member wants to raise about another. That is not only not necessary, but not appropriate. It is totally outwith—I say this with complete clarity and for the avoidance of doubt—the role of the Speaker.

If, after nine and a half years in this place, notwithstanding my best efforts to help the hon. Gentleman to do better, he still labours under not merely the misapprehension but the ignorant delusion that it is somehow the responsibility of the Chair to intervene, frankly, I have to say to colleagues, I cannot help him. I cannot help him. I have tried to help the hon. Gentleman and I have tried on many occasions to educate the hon. Gentleman, but if the hon... Gentleman will not be helped or educated, I cannot do anything about that.

What I can do something about—I have sought to do so for 10 years—is securing compliance with the procedures of this House. It is absolutely legitimate for the hon. Gentleman to speak in this debate if he thinks it is proper to do so. If the hon. Gentleman feels that the general approach that he has adopted to these sorts of matters—allegations of misconduct against other
Members—enhances his standing in the House, it is entirely for him to make that judgment. If he thinks it makes him a more popular or respected Member to spend quite a lot of time writing to the Standards Commissioner to complain about this one, that one or the other one—if that is the approach to parliamentary service, or a part of the approach to parliamentary service, for which the hon. Gentleman opts—that is his privilege. If he wishes to speak in this debate, including when I have resumed my seat, he is welcome to do so. He might usefully make a judgment about whether the House wants to hear him at great length when there is a clear judgment by the Committee that has been accepted and endorsed by the Opposition Chief Whip, but if he still feels he wants to speak at some considerable length, if it makes him feel better and if he thinks what an excellent contribution he has made, that is his prerogative.

What the hon. Gentleman will not do is to breach the rules of this House and tell me—I say this not least to members of the public—what the job of the Chair is. I know what the job of the Chair is and I have done it to the best of my ability. To err is human, so I make my mistakes, but I have done it to the best of my ability for over a decade. I do not simply assert or suggest but state with complete confidence that it is not part of my job to make representations to a Member that, because of this rumour or that rumour, or this allegation or that allegation, or this person disliking him or that person disliking him, it would be best if he stood down from the chairmanship of his Select Committee. That is not the responsibility of the Speaker of the House of Commons. If the hon. Gentleman still thinks otherwise, I fear he is beyond redemption in the matter. I would like to help him, but he just does not want to be helped.

Andrew Bridgen: Mr Speaker, I thank you for your advice, as always. For the past 10 years you have advised me on many occasions, but had you waited for my conclusion, you would have seen that I was going to extol your decision not to get involved in this matter. Had you done so, we may well have protected the reputation of this House, but I doubt that we ever would have got to see the full report that is now before us.

Despite this report being public knowledge—it has been available for Members to read for several days—the right hon. Member for Leicester East remains a member of the Labour party. He has the Labour Whip. He is still a serving member of the Labour national executive committee and he is still currently the candidate for Leicester East at the forthcoming election. That, of course, is a matter for the Labour party, and it is also, I believe, a matter for the public we all serve in our constituencies, not least in Leicester East. I believe—I think that many other people do—that Leicester East deserves rather better, Mr Speaker.

We can recall what we have done in the past and the way we have voted. We will all be held to account for that very shortly, on 12 December. Only a month after the right hon. Member for Leicester East rather reluctantly resigned, following the rent boy and cocaine scandal, from the chairmanship of the Home Affairs Committee, he was nominated by the Labour party to serve on the Justice Committee. That was only four weeks after he had considered himself unsuitable to continue as Chair of the Home Affairs Committee.

Mr Speaker: Order. I am sorry, but I must invite the hon. Gentleman to resume his seat and I will tell him why.

The hon. Gentleman tries to demonstrate how fair he is being by saying that, belatedly, he agrees with me, which he has never previously given any indication of at all. If that is what he now says, I am glad he has come to recognise the error of his past ways and the extreme folly, as well as the sheer nastiness, of making repeated representations to the Chair to intercede in a matter in which the Chair should not, of course, intercede.

What the hon. Gentleman is doing now is what he attempted to do on the occasion of the debate about the nomination of the right hon. Member for Leicester East to the Justice Committee. What the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) is seeking to do is to drag into this debate, as he dragged into that debate, material that is not appropriate to share with the House in the context of the debate. This is a short debate on a report. The reason why the hon. Gentleman’s point is not relevant or appropriate is, first of all, that he is going back on matters to do with the Justice Committee, of which I think the report does not treat. The report does not get involved in that. That is a historical matter. It was a matter of political opinion and parliamentary debate at the time; it is not relevant to the Standards Committee’s report.

Secondly, I am afraid that the hon. Gentleman, who is a party politician and a campaigning party politician—I acknowledge that—just cannot resist getting into the subject of whether it is or is not appropriate for a particular person to be a candidate in a given election. The hon. Gentleman gives his view—he obviously thinks it is enormously important and interesting, although it may not be enormously important or interesting to anyone else—as to whether the health of the people of Leicester East is best served by representation by its current right hon. Member or by someone else. I have to say to the hon. Gentleman. Gentleman that I am not interested in that. Frankly, I do not think that the House is interested in that. If the hon. Gentleman wants to say, “Look, I complained and I was right, and the report has criticised, censured and punished, or proposes to do so, the right hon. Gentleman,” he could have done that and sat down by now.

I give him a final warning, and it is a warning: I am not going to have the House abused by the way in which the hon. Gentleman chooses to behave. If he has a sentence or two that he wants to utter as to why he thinks that this is a decent report and he agrees with it, that is fine. If he wants to launch a further ad hominem attack on the right hon. Member for Leicester East, this is not the time or place to do so.

I say in all sincerity and kindness to the hon. Gentleman: show some antennae, man, for the will of the House, and show some sensitivity. You have made your point in making a complaint, which you had every right to do, and the Committee has determined the matter. It would be, I think, seemly if the hon. Gentleman speedily brought his speech to a conclusion.

Andrew Bridgen: Thank you once again for more help and advice, Mr Speaker.
Mr Speaker: Order. The hon. Gentleman will resume his seat. It is not help and advice; I am telling him what the position is. Don’t mix it with the Chair. If you have a couple more sentences to utter, you will do so; if you want to dilate at length, you will not.

Andrew Bridgen: Mr Speaker, I will bring my remarks to a conclusion, but it is clear to me, and it will be clear to the public, that to the flag-end of your tenure in that Chair, you are defending the indefensible and your very close relationship with the right hon. Member. In member in question. The House can come to its own conclusions. The Standards Committee has come to its own conclusions. And, Mr Speaker, the public will come to theirs. Thank you very much.

Mr Speaker: I am quite sure that the public will come to their own conclusions. Let me say to the hon. Gentleman that he can try to smear me; he will get the square root of nowhere. I am friendly with the right hon. Member for Leicester East, as I am friendly with the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope), the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Sir David Lidington), and the hon. Members for Stroud (Dr Drew) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon). I am friendly with a great many Members, having served in this place for 22 years. I do not get involved in matters appertaining to standards. There is a machinery for deliberation on those matters in the form of a Parliamentary Standards Commissioner and a Committee. They deal with those matters.

The hon. Gentleman, only a few moments ago, was saying, in what he thought was a frightfully clever twist, that he had come to accept that I was right to say that I could not get involved. If he is now saying that, in fact, my close relationship shows that I am trying to defend the right hon. Member for Leicester East, he is contradicting himself not within days, weeks or months; he is contradicting himself within minutes. I am not trying to defend the conduct of the right hon. Gentleman. What I am doing, on behalf of and in support of the House, is—colleagues; members of the public—defending the integrity of an independent process. If the hon. Gentleman cannot or will not grasp that fact, with the very greatest of respect to him—or such respect as I can muster—that says more about him than it does about me.

2.33 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): I, and I hope the whole House, wish that the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz) recovers and that his health is restored.

I strongly support the motion, which says that the House “approves the First Report of the Committee on Standards...HC 93”, and that we endorse “the recommendations in paragraphs 99 and 101” and the suspension from the service of the House for a period of six months.

I served with others on the Standards Committee in the early 2000s, when Elizabeth Filkin was the Standards Commissioner. She was badly treated by the House and treated even worse by the right hon. Member for Leicester East. Paragraph 97 of the report states:

“Mr Vaz has previously been found to have been in serious breach of the Code and in contempt of the House. In 2002 the Standards and Privileges Committee found he had recklessly made a damaging and untrue allegation against another person, which could have intimidated them, and had wrongly interfered with the House’s investigative process: in particular that ‘having set the Commissioner on a false line of inquiry Mr Vaz then accused her of interfering in a criminal investigation and threatened to report her to the Speaker’”.

It goes on to other points that he made.

My hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) rightly read out some of the words on the right hon. Gentleman’s website, which are totally contradicted by the report that I have in my hand. I think that someone who has done that after the report has come out should have the suspension doubled to a year.

I say this: this is not a party point, but the right hon. Gentleman should not be nominated. If he is nominated, he should not be elected, and if he is elected, he should be suspended for a very long time.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution.

2.35 pm

Sir Christopher Chope: I had not intended to participate in the debate, but I am a member of the current Committee. As my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) will recognise, serving on the Standards Committee is one of the less pleasant responsibilities that falls to Members, but that is the position I have been in for quite a long time. I can recall a time when we passed sentence, in a sense, on my right hon. Friend the Member for Basingstoke (Mrs Miller), saying that she should make an apology to the House. I was in the House when she made her apology, and I recall the sense of outrage that her apology was not as full as some people might have wished. As a result, she suffered additional penalties in her constituency—it was a long time ago and I am sure that has all been forgiven.

In that context, when I listened to my hon. Friend the Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) reading out what is on the website of the right hon. Member for Leicester East (Keith Vaz), I was filled with horror, because it is totally contradictory to the findings of the Committee. What does not come across in a report such as this is the detail that has been gone into by the members of the Committee—including lay-members, who do it for love, really—the commissioner and her predecessor. An enormous amount of work has gone into this, and we reached a conclusion:

“We are satisfied from the evidence we have considered that Mr Vaz did on 27 August 2016 offer to procure and pay for illegal drugs for use by a third party.”

Paragraph 54 states:

“On the basis of the evidence supplied by the audio-recording and the transcript, we reach the following conclusions germane to the Commissioner’s findings...that Mr Vaz’s explanation of the incident on 27 August 2016 is not believable...that on this occasion Mr Vaz expressed a willingness to procure a Class A drug, cocaine, for the use of another person...that on this occasion Mr Vaz engaged in paid-for sex. We consider that the evidence supporting these conclusions is compelling.”

On that basis, I follow my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) in asking whether it would be reasonable, if the right hon. Gentleman is returned following the next general election, for the
Standards Committee to revisit this issue, having regard to what is on the website now. I commend the work of the Standards Committee and particularly that of its Chair, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), but it seems to me that what is on the website is designed to bring the work of the Standards Committee into disrepute.

Mr Speaker: I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman, who has expressed himself with his customary courtesy. I think that the answer to that question—I am looking plaintively in the direction of the Chair of the Standards Committee, the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green)—is that that is a matter for the Committee. It would be quite wrong for me to seek to influence it any way, and I do not do so. It is absolutely not a matter for me or, indeed, for any occupant of the Chair. It is, I think, a matter for the Committee. I say this by way of explanation and attempted intelligibility to observers: the Committee has authority in this matter and, if you will, ownership of it. Committees are in charge of their own inquiries. It would be a matter for the Committee, but obviously not in this Parliament. That is the best way to leave it.

Obviously, although I heard the recital—I do not use the term “recital” in any disobliging sense—by the hon. Member for North West Leicestershire (Andrew Bridgen) of what was on the website, it is not something that I have studied, and I hope people will understand that it is not something that the Speaker would have studied. There is no reason to expect that I would have done so. It is a matter for the Committee. It has a range of sanctions available to it, and it makes the judgment as to which sanction or set of sanctions it wishes to recommend to the House. If, for whatever reason, the Committee does not recommend an apology, an apology is not required. If, on the other hand, it does, it might be. A very different matter was recently brought to my attention in relation to a non-Member and the allocation of a pass, and I had to point out that there was not an unpurged contempt. A person had behaved badly and been criticised, but he had not failed to apologise when instructed to do so. For whatever reason, he had not been instructed to do so and was therefore not required to do so. My understanding is that that is the case in this instance. Whether that is the right thing or the wrong thing is a matter for the Committee.

Mr Speaker: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. It might help the House if I explain that the Standards Committee has specifically asked that the next Leader of the House—or me, if I continue in office in the new Parliament—bring the suspension forward as soon as the House reassembles, so that it is not, in effect, only a two-day suspension. That has been specifically requested by the Committee.

Mr Speaker: Forgive me, but I was myself perfectly clear on that point, although I am grateful to the Leader of the House for making it clear to colleagues. It was always intended that, if the House accepted the report, the suspension would take effect after the election. Whether the Committee wishes to revisit the issue, in the light of what the hon. Member for Christchurch (Sir Christopher Chope) and others have said, is, if he will forgive me saying so, a slightly different point.

Kate Green: Further to that point of order, Mr Speaker. My understanding is that in the event that the right hon. Member is returned, we would like the next Leader of the House to bring forward a motion to continue the suspension, but neither this Parliament, this Leader of the House nor any Member of this Parliament can compel that. It would be a matter for the next Parliament. In so far as the next Committee is concerned, any Member is at liberty to make a complaint about the conduct of a Member at the time that he was serving as a Member. We have recently introduced new provisions around historical cases, but the Committee would be a new Committee, and would not be able simply to pick up an old case conducted by our current Committee.

Mr Speaker: Thank you. That was by way of a public information notice from the Chair of the Committee, which I hope is helpful to colleagues.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House—

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Tributes to the Speaker’s Chaplain

Mr Speaker: As people will speedily see, we move from one subject to another quite quickly, and we now come to the very happy business of the motion on tributes to the Speaker’s Chaplain. I have the great pleasure of calling the Leader of the House to move the motion.

2.42 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): I beg to move.

That this House congratulates the Reverend Prebendary Rose Hudson-Wilkin on her twenty-eight years of ordained ministry in the Church of England, nine years of which have been in the service of Mr Speaker and this House as Chaplain to the Speaker, the first woman and the first BAME holder of that post; expresses its appreciation for the generous, ecumenical and compassionate spirit of her work among hon. Members and staff of the House; and wishes her every success in her forthcoming ministry as Bishop of Dover and Bishop in Canterbury.

You are absolutely right, Mr Speaker, to say we are moving on to a really happy discussion. It is a great honour to move the motion and give the House the opportunity to pay tribute to the Reverend Prebendary Rose Hudson-Wilkin, the 79th Chaplain to the Speaker of the House of Commons. I would like to thank her on behalf of the whole House for her service.

“Let the people praise thee, O God; let all the people praise thee. Then shall the earth yield her increase; and God, even our own God, shall bless us.”

These are the beautiful uplifting words that the reverend prebendary reads to us in her strong, resonant, resounding voice every morning when we meet in private to send up our petitions to God. It is when your chaplain, Mr Speaker, creates an atmosphere of prayerfulness that allows right hon. and hon. Members to set their souls at ease with God as they prepare for the business ahead of them. She does so in a way that would move the heart of the most stony-hearted atheist to feel there is a true and a divine presence. To achieve this through the power of speech and the use of language is a great achievement, and one that has daily been the triumph of your chaplain, to the benefit of Members of Parliament.

It is not only liturgically that your chaplain, who is now retiring to go on to greater things, has been a major asset to this place, Mr Speaker; it is also in her pastoral work, for the chaplain has been a help to many Members, in counselling, guiding and supporting them through difficulties in their lives and giving them succour as a true shepherd to her flock. She has worked closely in a spirit of ecumenism with Father Pat Browne and has not been in any sense narrowly sectarian. Anybody who has had dealings with your chaplain or who has met her has found it a help and benefit. What more can possibly be asked from someone in clerical orders?

It has been 359 years since the first Speaker’s Chaplain, Edward Voyce, was appointed in 1660, and while it is of great significance that the reverend prebendary is the first in the intervening three and a half centuries to be a woman and the first to be from an ethnic minority, I look forward to the day when we no longer have to remark on the race or sex of the Speaker’s Chaplain. The Lord does not look at the things people look at. People look at the outward appearance, but the Lord looks at the heart. She is a person of God—the highest calling of all. Dare I say it, but the calling to God is a higher calling than the calling to political life, and all that matters is that calling?

For the chaplain, it has always been very simple. God’s calling has made her who she is, and she has followed her calling with the calm confidence we all admire so much. Her key responsibilities, in addition to pastoral care and daily prayers, have included running a weekly eucharistic service in the chapel and performing weddings, marriage blessings and baptisms for Members and their children. She has also led many services to celebrate the lives of those who have died during their service to Parliament. I think many of us would particularly like to thank her for her part in the commemorative ceremonies and her support following the loss of a dear colleague, Jo Cox and PC Keith Palmer. We will never forget the bravery and passion of all those who have worked in this place, and we will never forget the chaplain’s dutiful care to her flock.

The chaplain has always shown her devotion to those who need her, whether in Montego Bay or on these shores, and I know so many people in the parliamentary estate feel that her remarkably self-possessed view of life has sustained them through difficult times. We will never forget the chaplain’s trust in God’s grace, which has, I think, helped give her the courage of her convictions to speak out during her ministry. We should all seek to live by her words on the importance of improving the culture in Westminster and making this a place where everyone is treated as they should be.

It only seems suitable to end with words from the 1662 Prayer Book—that great book of liturgical beauty, that ornament of the Church of England and, speaking as a Catholic, that bit of the Anglican Church of which I am possibly the most jealous; some of our translations are nothing like so beautiful. Leaving that to one side, it seems suitable to end with words from the Prayer Book:

“Almighty and everlasting God, who alone workest great marvels: Send down upon our Bishops and Curates, and all Congregations committed to their charge, the healthful Spirit of thy grace; and, that they may truly please thee, pour upon them the continual dew of thy blessing.”

I hope, Mr Speaker, that as your chaplain moves to Dover, the continual dew of God’s blessing will rain down upon her.

2.48 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): I thank the Leader of the House for a really wonderful tribute to Reverend Rose. Before I pay tribute to Reverend Rose, I want to refer to your statement yesterday, Mr Speaker, on the new Speaker’s Chaplain. We welcome Reverend Canon Patricia Hillas, who will be with us shortly. I am sure she will do the same wonderful job as Reverend Rose has done. I was sorry to miss mass yesterday, when Reverend Rose and Father Pat were together. They have made a formidable team in our darkest hours.

We wish Reverend Prebendary Rose Hudson-Wilkin—I am sorry she is not here in the Chamber, in her usual place—a heartfelt farewell. Reverend Rose arrived in the United Kingdom to join the Church Army as an 18-year-old young woman, displaying the Windrush generation’s adaptability. It did not take long for Reverend Rose to flourish, and in 1994 she was ordained to the priesthood, at the point where women had only recently been allowed to be priests. She continued to splinter the
glass ceiling spectacularly, given the context of the male-dominated area she was called to—not only for women, but crucially, and seemingly effortlessly, for women of colour.

It is no surprise to those of us who know her that, while holding the prestigious position of 79th Chaplain to the Speaker of the House of Commons—as you heard, Mr Speaker, in tributes to you, a well-deserved appointment—and being one of the three chaplains to Her Majesty the Queen, she is much loved by her congregation at Holy Trinity church, Dalston, and at All Saints church, Haggerston, where she has worked for over 16 and a half years.

If you ask Reverend Rose, I am sure she will say that her pastoral missions both here and in Hackney share a common thread, and that is to make sure that everyone is well spiritually and everyone feels good enough to do their jobs well. The Leader of the House was right: when she says prayers, which she does every day, I often feel as though I have never heard those prayers before. She has an amazing way of making you feel that that is the first time you have ever heard those important words. Reverend Rose will tell you that prayer is at the heart of what she does.

Reverend Rose has always been a visible presence and is often seen around Parliament, as she says, “loitering with intent”, comfortable in her own skin and “in her hair”. I know that she has sought out hon. Members when they have faced difficulties. We have not had to go to her; she comes to us, and she makes sure that she counsels us in the appropriate way.

But what Rose has always been keen to emphasise is that in all she does she feels connected with—rooted to—her past in Jamaica, her grandparents and their grandparents, with sacrifices, ideas and hope passed through stories flowing from one generation to the next. She says that such a foundation will be an integral part of success for the next generation of young black people growing up in the UK, on the basis that “they survived, so we must thrive.” Yes, she has a way with words.

True happiness, Reverend Rose maintains, flows from where you come from, where you are rooted and the depth of spirit that tells you who you are. She poses questions: why should women be seen and not heard? Why should people of colour not be seen in all walks of life? But a good question: why should women be seen and not heard? Why should people of colour not be seen in all walks of life? But a good question—why should women be seen and not heard? Why should people of colour not be seen in all walks of life?

Reverend Rose will tell you that prayer is at the heart of what she does.

Mr Speaker: I must thank the shadow Leader of the House, and I think I speak for the House in doing so, for the sheer warmth and magnificence of that tribute. I think that there is an electricity in the Chamber as a result of what the right hon. Lady has said and the unadulterated passion with which she has delivered it, and I want to thank her.

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2.54 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): As parliamentary warden of St Margaret’s church, Parliament Square, may I join in supporting the motion of my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House? The only thing that surprised me about his speech is that he did not mention—although the motion does—that Rose Hudson-Wilkin will be the Bishop in Canterbury, where my right hon. Friend married his wife, with a number of people presiding, and he managed to incorporate in this currently Anglican cathedral a Roman Catholic mass. I think that it is almost coming home time for him.

May I say how much I welcomed the words of the right hon. Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz)? Watching Rose Hudson-Wilkin work with John Hall as Dean of Westminster, with Andrew Tremlett and with Jane Sinclair, who have been the rectors at St Margaret’s, and in her sharing of the monthly parliamentary communion and the breakfast in your house, Mr Speaker, we have seen closely in private what she is also well known for in public. I add that it was a delight to meet her grandchildren at the reception in your house, Mr Speaker; they are a tribute to the modern generation in this country, and if some of them were to come here not perhaps as Speaker’s chaplain but as Members of Parliament it would be a delight, especially if I could remain here to welcome and join them.

Mr Speaker: Bless you; I am deeply obliged to the hon. Gentleman for what he has said.

I want to end with some words that will be familiar to Rose Hudson-Wilkin:

“Our vision is for everyone, everywhere to encounter God’s love and be empowered to transform their communities through faith shared in words and action.”

She says she comes from Montego Bay; I say she comes from the Church Army, and those words are the Church Army dedication. I thank her for her dedication to us.

2.56 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Mr Speaker, I hope you will not mind if I start by briefly expressing my thanks to you for your service in the Chair and...
wishing you all the very best for the future. You have been a source of encouragement and sound advice to many of us in the Scottish National party, and I have been particularly grateful for your support in my role as Chief Whip. Of course, for Scottish National party Members, staying at Westminster is not a long-term ambition, but the role that you have played and the reforms that you have introduced have certainly made our time here more tolerable.

As others have said, Mr Speaker, one of your most significant legacies and early decisions is the appointment of Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin as your chaplain. I remember as a younger, keener but casual observer of business in this place reading some of the coverage and criticisms of that appointment at that time, but, as you have previously said, Mr Speaker, those critics were wrong in every single respect.

From the start, SNP Members here have found that Rose brings a presence of welcome, comfort and reassurance. There are some who would question the value or relevance of starting the parliamentary day with Prayers, but of course participation is voluntary and, as the Leader of the House alluded to, I do not think that anyone, believer or non-believer, who has had the privilege of experiencing the prayers led by the Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin could doubt their value. No matter how tense the day may be, no matter how important or portentous the business to come, her tone and eloquence at the start of each day have a levelling effect and remind us all that ultimately we are all equal—for believers, we are equal in the sight of God.

Prayers, especially in recent times, have provided some memorable moments, even if they have not always been visible to the public. The Rose’s choice of texts often matches with uncanny ability the occasion of the day and hits the right note. At the start of our proceedings on the historic Saturday sitting a couple of weeks ago, she began with St Paul:

“Do not be anxious”.

That was the moment that broke the ice, and chuckling could be heard across the Chamber.

By leading those prayers, Rose has ministered to the House collectively. Her presence in the Under Gallery, literally praying for us as we have taken part in some of the biggest and most historic votes of recent years, has not gone unnoticed. She has also ministered to many Members individually as a chaplain, especially at times when tragedy has struck Parliament and the House. She has also built strong ecumenical relations, forging, in particular, a firm bond with Canon Pat Browne. He may not be a chaplain, and early-day motion 71 on ahead equality and LGBT+ people in the Church is undoubtedly a chaplain, and early-day motion 71 congratulates him on his 10 years of service. He invited Rose to address us at mass in the crypt yesterday—it is, after all, the chapel of her chaplaincy—and her reflection was once again on that admonition to not be anxious but to trust in God. We hope that that is what she will do as she takes on the role of Bishop of Dover. Once again she is breaking down barriers and conventions, as she has done here in Westminster, and as you have done, Mr Speaker, in appointing her.

We will warmly welcome, in due course, Canon Tricia Hills. She brings considerable experience of promoting diversity, inclusion and ecumenism, all of which means that we can have every confidence in her as a worthy successor to Rose.

Rose said to us last night that, although she was leaving this place, she would carry us in her heart and in her prayers. She can be assured that we will do the same for her, in ours. This morning, at Prayers, she invoked the priestly blessing from the Book of Numbers:

“The Lord bless you and keep you; The Lord make His face shine upon you”.

Perhaps, in return, we can invoke the old Irish blessing:

“May the road rise up to meet you. May the wind be always at your back. May the sun shine warm upon your face; the rains fall soft upon your fields and until we meet again, may God hold you in the palm of His hand.”

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Gentleman for what he has said. I hope that observers of our proceedings understand the enormous affection and esteem in which we all hold Rose. I just want to mention that a constituent of mine, and a former constituent, are in the Public Gallery: Julie Kincaide, my constituent, and former councillor Sue Polhill, who was one of my constituents until relatively recently. In this session, I hope that they are seeing the House at its best.

I want also to mention, because I think it is apposite and there is a piqquancy about it, that the Church of England’s diversity adviser, Elizabeth Henry, who has helped to deliver real beneficial and progressive change, is with us as well. Elizabeth, you have been the most enormous asset to the Church, but I want to thank you publicly. You have been a great support in relation to Rose—you were an early champion of hers, knowing her quality—and you greatly assisted my colleagues and me only the other day in the recruitment of her successor. I salute the work that you do, the passion that you share, the experience that you bring, and the counsel that you offer. They are very precious.

3.2 pm

Sir Roger Gale (North Thanet) (Con): I have always thought that the job of the Speaker’s Chaplain is rather like the job of the person known as “the bish” on one of Her Majesty’s warships. That person prows around the lower decks, surrounded by heathens and heretics, waiting for somebody to call upon him. I guess that this place, particularly in the last few months, has been just a little bit like that. But the wonderful thing about Rose is that she has always been there to be called on when she is needed, and through some very stressful times for everyone on both sides of the House she has been a tower of strength.

You guys and girls have come to say goodbye to Rose. I have come to say hello. As my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) said, the Bishop of Dover is the Bishop in Canterbury. Let me also say, just as an aside, that earlier today, during questions to the Church Commissioner, it was asked, “How does the Archbishop of Canterbury manage when he has so much to do, not only at home but overseas?” The answer is, of course, that he is not the Bishop in Canterbury. That will be Rose, and I know that she will be a tower of strength to Archbishop Justin, as she has been to this place.
But Rose is coming to east Kent, and I have warned the lady who is going to become Bishop Rose that one of her first duties will be to visit the wonderful constituency of North Thanet, and to spend a happy couple of hours on Margate’s seashore in January, when the rain and the wind and the snow will almost certainly be horizontal. That is when we in Margate celebrate the Blessing of the Seas. That is the occasion, on the feast of the Epiphany, when we throw a small Greek Cypriot boy into the freezing waters of the North sea and—for so far without success—try to drown him. The Bishop of Dover—the Bishop in Canterbury—plays a key role in that event. Rose, we are looking forward enormously to welcoming you to east Kent.

Mr Speaker: That speech was typical of the hon. Gentleman. Thank you.

3.5 pm

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): I am grateful for the opportunity to participate in this tribute, but I regret that I was not in my place to take part in the tributes to you, Mr Speaker. I should say that I was not here for your tributes because I was adhering to your rule that we cannot just beetle into the Chamber after the start of a debate, although I realise that you might not have been adhering to that rule quite so strictly today as on other occasions. Had I been here from the start, or had I had the opportunity to participate, I would have said that one of the things you have done, with which I would like to associate myself in every way, is to give steadfast support to Rose. Not only before I joined this House but subsequently, on a number of occasions I have heard you stand steadfastly and resolutely against racism associated with her as an individual, and against gender bias and gender discrimination. What you have exuded with your appointment of Rose as Speaker’s Chaplain is what I hope we as a House embody. I have never heard a Member of this House—maybe they did previously—criticise Rose. I think she is wonderful. She exudes a faith that I do not talk about often but that I hold personally and privately.

The shadow Leader of the House, who is also a wonderful lady, said that she was sorry that Rose was not here. I think that that embodies Rose’s character. She was here during your tributes as a steadfast support to you, Mr Speaker, and held him there during all those precious moments. She has been precious to me and to my wife, and I know she has been precious to many in this House. For my part, Mr Speaker, I thank you for allowing me to speak so early and for giving me the opportunity to participate in this debate and to thank Rose from the bottom of our hearts.

3.9 pm

Sir David Lidington (Aylesbury) (Con): I am delighted to be able to associate myself with and wholeheartedly support the motion moved by my right hon. Friend the Leader of the House. I want to say two things about my memories of Rose. First, from those few minutes at the beginning of our parliamentary days when the Speaker’s Chaplain reads a psalm and leads us in a brief session of prayer, I will always remember the sheer musicality of Rose’s voice, which gave extra resonance and meaning to the texts in which she was leading us. I remember, too, her willingness to vary the normal order of prayers when the occasion made that right. There have been times—I remember this from when I was Leader of the House in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attack on Westminster bridge and the Palace of Westminster—when the sense of shock in this Chamber was palpable. Somehow on those occasions, Rose knew which psalm, which passage, which prayer to introduce in place of one of our usual prayers to reflect that mood in the House and to respond to the particular occasion.

My second point is about her pastoral care. The hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) has spoken of his and his family’s experiences. Again from when I was Leader of the House, in the months and, indeed, years that followed the dreadful murder of our colleague Jo Cox, one of the things that is etched in my memory is how Members on all sides—particularly, though not exclusively, women Members—began to open up about their experiences. Again from when I was Leader of the House, in the immediate aftermath of the terrorist attack on Westminster bridge and the Palace of Westminster—when the sense of shock in this Chamber at the beginning of the day has been palpable. Somehow on those occasions, Rose knew which psalm, which passage, which prayer to introduce in place of one of our usual prayers to reflect that mood in the House and to respond to the particular occasion.

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they represented, had come into politics with a noble motive of trying to make things better for the people they serve.

Rose is now going on to greater things within the Church, and I am sure that the people of Margate and the rest of north Kent will soon discover that they have in Rose Hudson-Wilkin shepherd of great talent and unparalleled pastoral commitment. Those of us in this House now, whether we are hoping to stay or intending to leave, will always remember Rose with affection, with pride and with a sense of love, because love was what she brought to this place and what she always sought to embody.

3.14 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I appreciate that you, Mr Speaker, are occasionally someone who believes in constructive iconoclasm. This is the sort of occasion when I say to myself, “Would it not be wonderful if, just for once, we could not sit as Robespierre demanded we sit in the revolutionary council, on the left and the right, but we all sat together, on one side or the other?” I say that because today we are not divided. We are not divided by politics, theology or religion; we are divided in no way. We are united by an extraordinary admiration for a truly remarkable woman. We have heard some extraordinary contributions. Everyone who has spoken related to Rose Hudson-Wilkin in their own particular and personal way. That is so typical of the henoetic qualities of the woman: that she appealed to every one of us, from our different traditions, in so many different ways.

Some of the tributes that have been paid today have been emotional. Some of them have been stirring. Some of them have been hard to listen to. But in many ways, that was Rose’s ministry here in this place; sometimes she went when the words were difficult to say. When my mother died, Rose was an extraordinary source of comfort to me, and I think every one of us has had a similar story to tell. The hon. Member for Glasgow North (Patrick Grady) was slightly censoring his comments when he gave that famous Irish blessing about the wind and fire to be lit and a brain is like a bucket to be filled. She of those people who believes that intelligence is like a boat, which has wonderful lines saying, “Don’t worry too much about praying because if you can’t find the words, God will give you the words. God will always find the words for your prayer. You don’t need to worry about getting the words right. You don’t even need to worry about getting them in the right order. You don’t even need to worry about your vocabulary or your enunciation. God will give you the words.” Rose Hudson-Wilkin always had the words; she always knew what to say; it was a short contribution or a long one.

It has been mentioned that Rose is not in her usual place in the Under Gallery, where I have seen her sit many a time, shaking her head, almost imperceptibly, but sending us the message that says, “Oh dear, oh dear, what are you doing now?” and praying for us. I believe she is without at the present time, but close, and I like to think she will always be close to this place.

The former Bishop of London the Right Reverend and right hon. Richard Chartres and I were at school together. We have an arrangement whereby he does not say anything about what I got up to and I reciprocate. We took different theological paths, but when it came time to appoint the next Bishop of London, I felt it appropriate to write to him to say, “I make no suggestion as to who the next bishop should be, but she should be a woman, her initials should be R. H. W. and if possible, she should come from Montego Bay.” If you can find anyone who fits those criteria, I am sure she would make an excellent Bishop of London.” An excellent choice was made, and I am glad to say that Rose has found her bishopric down on the south coast—although I have to say that when the right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale) talked about hurling young boys into the foaming brine for some extraordinary marine sacrifice, I thought that perhaps a bit of exorcism might be appropriate in such places. Had Rose been appointed the Bishop of London, she would have broken not only another ceiling but a stained-glass ceiling. That is what Rose has done. She would have achieved so much by breaking another ceiling but a stained-glass ceiling.

I cannot imagine why my late mother, Dominica, felt it appropriate for me to learn that couplet, but she certainly did and, in the manner of education back in those days, she made me repeat it on a regular basis.

Slightly oddly, we have heard Rose described as the “Reverend Prebendary Rose Hudson-Wilkin. As she ascends to the Episcopal purple, some of us refer to her as the “about to be bishop”. But whatever we call her, a Rose is just as sweet by any name, and what we have here is our Rose, be she bishop, prebendary, or canon. Be she whatever, she is our Rose Hudson-Wilkin and she is remarkable for that.

The horror of the murder of Keith Palmer was mentioned earlier. Many of us were in the House on that occasion, and many of us remember that Rose and Canon Pat Browne organised three different services on that very day, so that everyone could have the opportunity to make their peace with God and to find comfort and succour on that day. It was as a truly remarkable occasion, and she rose to that occasion. I think you rose to that occasion too, Mr Speaker, as did the House. It is a tragedy that it took that appalling, cold-blooded murder of such a good man for us to come together, as we did in the memory of Jo Cox. We have had some terrible times in Parliament in the past decade, but we have also had some great, great times, and the terrible times have been mitigated by the love, warmth, illumination and prayer of Rose Hudson-Wilkin.

Last night, as my friend, the hon. Member for Glasgow North said, Rose commemorated the holy mass in the Chapel underneath. The reading was from Romans, which has wonderful lines saying, “Don’t worry too much about praying because if you can’t find the words, God will give you the words. God will always find the words for your prayer. You don’t need to worry about getting the words right. You don’t even need to worry about getting them in the right order. You don’t even need to worry about your vocabulary or your enunciation. God will give you the words.” Rose Hudson-Wilkin always had the words; she always knew what to say; it was a short contribution or a long one.

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I find Rose’s kindness, generosity, warmth and love remarkable—they are characteristics from which I draw strength—but let us not forget her intellect. She has a formidable intellect: she is a great Bible scholar and a great student of theology. From the discussions we had, perhaps from slightly different theological perspectives, I learned such a number of things from Rose. She is one of those people who believes that intelligence is like a fire to be lit and a brain is like a bucket to be filled. She actually wants to draw you out and discuss matters with
you. She is a truly remarkable woman. I feel the need to head down to Dover just to keep in contact with her. Whether or not I transport myself corporeally down to Dover, all I know is that her prayers will be enveloping this building and this place, because she is part of our history and part of the culture that we have here, and we are the better for it.

This morning, during the tributes that were quite rightly paid to you, Mr Speaker, one thing we could not do was give any credit to your successor, because we do not know who your successor is—bookmakers appear to know, but that is entirely inappropriate to mention—but in the case of Rose we can mention my good friend Tricia Hillas. On behalf of all the community and congregation of St Barnabas Northolt, may I say what an excellent choice you have made, Mr Speaker? Despite an unfortunate predilection for Watford football club—I rather suspect she was attracted to Vicarage Road for theological reasons, rather than the lure of Troy Deeney—I must warn you, Mr Speaker, that when we come to meet Tricia Hillas, there will be dancing, singing and music, because Tricia Hillas can never stand still in one place from one minute to the next. We have talked about our different theological traditions—I tend to be with the late Monsignor Ronnie Knox, who felt that by and large enthusiasm was not a good thing and that we have a bit too much of it—but Tricia Hillas is an enthusiast. She is a marvellous pastor and will bring so much energy, courage, colour and excitement to this place.

I am, of course, backing away from the stage and the limelight, returning to well-merited obscurity—[Hon. Members: “What a shame!”] No, no; were it put to a vote, I think I would have left years ago. [Hon. Members: “Never!”] Well, I think there is precedent for holding a seated vote, or a standing vote—I forget which one is which—but let us not chance fate. I wish everyone who is standing in the election every success and happiness. I want Members to know two things for when the new House assembles and they meet Tricia Hillas. First, she is absolutely a woman of God to the marrow of her bones. She is a woman who will bring God’s blessing to this place. Secondly, it is almost impossible to imagine anyone, having had my religious belief holed below the waterline when I read too much for someone at a young age of some of the things that had happened in British and European history in the first half of the 20th century.

If, as some people say, religion is irrational, then also agnosticism can be irrational, too. What do I mean by that? I mean that somebody who does not have a particular religious belief is nevertheless hugely touched and impressed by those people who do, and particularly by those people who do and who put it into practice by praying on one’s behalf. At the risk of slightly embarrassing him, and I suspect that he will be the next to be called, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has a habit of sending little notes to colleagues on the eve of elections—[Interruption.]

Mr Speaker: Order. I know that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) would want to hear this. The right hon. Gentleman is referring to him and I am sure that he will want to hear it.

Dr Lewis: As I was in mid-sentence saying, the hon. Gentleman has a wonderful habit of sending little notes to colleagues at election time and at other times when he thinks that they may need a little bit of encouragement saying, without any sort of patronising air, but with an air of true Christian love, that he is praying for them and their welfare. As someone who is not blessed with deep religious faith, I know how much I deeply appreciate that, and that is, I am sure, one of the reasons why he, irrespective of politics, is loved and respected in all parts of this Chamber. Rose Hudson-Wilkin falls into, from my perspective, exactly the same character. It must have been very daunting for her to descend into this pit of monstrous egos, but she carried it off tremendously. She has never talked down to us or scolded us. She has gently guided us. As has been said, she has given hints through the choice of appropriate prayers and appropriate language, and through the putting forward of a philosophy of righteousness, encouragement and love from which we all have benefited, whether we are religious, whether we have faith or whether we lack it. For that and for her kindness to all who work in this place, I thank her.

3.30 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for New Forest East (Dr Lewis). He has come through a hard time in relation
to health. As I was aware of that, I made it my business to hold him very much in my prayers, as I do many people in this House—not that anyone will know, because our prayers are private. The right hon. Gentleman does know that, however, because I spoke to him about it.

I am also very pleased to follow the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who made a constructive contribution, as he always does. I will miss him when he leaves, as he is my friend in this House. In fact, he was one of the first Members I met when I was first elected to the House. I wish him well in whatever the future may hold; I know it will be a good one. I have very much enjoyed our fellowship. He has also had a hard time health-wise, and has come out the other side, due—I believe in my heart—to the prayers of God’s people.

I wish to add my voice to the many who have paid tribute to the Speaker’s Chaplain, Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin. I have met her on many occasions, and I have always been inspired by the gentle, measured and thoughtful manner with which she has approached personal conversations as well as scheduled events. I do not think there is one of us who could say that they did not enjoy and feel uplifted by a conversation with Reverend Rose. I know that I always did; I just always felt so encouraged by what she said.

Scripture says, in Proverbs 31, “Who can find a virtuous woman? Her value is greater than that of rubies.” Well, this House has been blessed and encouraged to have been guided spiritually by Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin. We can easily see the worth of her guidance and the worthwhile things that have been accomplished in this place. Rose by name, rose by nature; I think every one of us has enjoyed her time here. Parliament has seen frustration and tempers rising to unheard of levels in this place, with repeated calls for calmness and compassion. Reverend Rose has had a gentle spirit and calming influence, and has been a true ambassador for the Lord Jesus. We are exhorted by the word of God to speak the truth but to do so in love, and she does so all the time. That has been missing all too often in this Chamber, but never, ever in the actions of Reverend Rose.

I am a member of the Baptist Church. When I first came to this place, I was made aware that there was holy communion in St Margaret’s church across the way. Although I am not an Anglican, I felt that I should—I wanted to—be there. From the very beginning, I was encouraged by that holy communion. As I look around the Chamber today, I see many Members who were also at holy communion. We enjoyed that time of fellowship together.

We have daily Prayers in the Chamber. People back home ask me whether we still have Prayers and Scripture in the Chamber, and they are encouraged when I tell them that we do. I am also encouraged every day when I come into this Chamber and hear Scripture and Prayer, which is so important. I can honestly say that that makes me feel encouraged for the day ahead. I said to Reverend Rose once, “I would like to have holy communion at least once a week or maybe every day, if that is possible, instead of once a month, because every day that we have holy communion I feel that we have had a visit from the Lord himself.” Holy communion was an important part of what she did.

My hon. Friend the Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson) referred to the empathy and compassion that Reverend Rose has shown him, his wife and his young child. None of us in this Chamber—especially not me, as his colleague and friend—could fail to be moved and encouraged by that.

I wish Reverend Rose every success and God’s richest blessing as she continues her ministry as the new Bishop of Dover. I exhort her to keep pressing towards the prize of the high calling of God in Christ Jesus. May the words of St Patrick—our patron saint in Northern Ireland—be her battle cry as she moves forward:

“Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me, Christ in me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me, Christ on my right, Christ on my left, Christ when I lie down, Christ when I sit down, Christ when I arise, Christ in the heart of every man who thinks of me, Christ in the mouth of everyone who speaks of me, Christ in every eye that sees me, Christ in every ear that hears me.”

I thank Reverend Rose. God bless her in all that she does and will do in the future. I know that in Dover or wherever it may be, she will serve her Lord and Saviour, who we serve here.

3.35 pm

Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): It is a privilege to follow the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon).

The hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) referred to the holy mass. What is the meaning of the word “holy”? Daily, at Prayers, we invoke the fellowship of the Holy Ghost. I know that the hon. Member for Strangford would say “Holy Spirit”, but I prefer to stick with the original words. I have no idea how to define “holy” or “holiness”, and I am satisfied that there is no satisfactory dictionary definition, but I know holiness when I have encountered it, and we have encountered it in the presence of Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin.

3.36 pm

Robert Neill (Bromley and Chislehurst) (Con): I want briefly to add a personal note of thanks and tribute to Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin. Rose married Anne-Louise, my wife, and me about 18 months ago. She did that with great charm, great style and joyfulness, and great Christianity. She showed great care and sensitivity to us in preparing us for that wedding, and also to our families, and, in particular, Anne-Louise's two children, who had lost their own father tragically. The care that she showed has always stuck with us. Since then, particularly in the past few months, when Anne-Louise, sadly, has been unwell, Rose's continuing support and prayers, and the kindness that she has shown to our family, mean more to us than any words that I can say in this Chamber could ever adequately convey.
I also want to say a quick word about Rose’s husband, Ken, who has been a great support to her, and who I, as Chair of the Justice Committee, had the pleasure of meeting when he was working as a prison chaplain. He, too, has been a great servant of God and of the broader community, and a great witness to his faith. That enables me also to say how valued the work of the prison chaplaincy service is by many in difficult times of their lives.

Anne-Louise specifically asked me to come here today and say that she is still in hospital but on the mend, and that Rose’s support has meant more to us than anything. For those of us who do have a Christian faith, she could not be a better pastor and shepherd. For those who do not have such a faith, there could be no better ambassador. Dover will gain immeasurably from her arrival as its suffragan bishop.

Finally, Mr Speaker, I wish you every success and your family every happiness for the future. It might not be so easy for me to see directly eye to eye with your successor; that might be more of a physical challenge for some of us. I wish you well and hope that all goes for some of us. I wish you well and hope that all goes happily for you and your family in the future. In the end, we ought to remember that the things that bring us here in our desire to serve our communities are more important than the things that may divide us on political grounds.

Mr Speaker: The beauty of the hon. Gentleman’s tribute to Reverend Rose will, I think, remain with colleagues for a long time to come. As to the matter of physical stature, he, I and the right hon. Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan) share in common that characteristic of notable shortness, but I have always argued that we should at least be regarded as environmentally friendly on the grounds that we do not take up excessive space.

3.39 pm

Martin Vickers (Cleethorpes) (Con): It is a pleasure to join these tributes to Reverend Rose. Only a remarkable lady could have come from Montego Bay to the position of your chaplain, Mr Speaker, and those of us who have heard something of her journey realise how remarkable it has been.

I am one of those who has regularly attended her morning communions, followed by breakfast in your apartments, Mr Speaker. One of the great beauties of those occasions is that, as the Leader of the House said, the service is based on the Book of Common Prayer, which is vastly superior to all that has followed. We have heard a wide range of speakers from the community, and Rose has introduced us to many people who have shared with us the challenges of their ministry or work, which has been exceptionally valuable. On those occasions, Rose has also invited individual Members to describe their faith journey, and I have found those sessions to be of particular value.

I also want to talk about Rose’s wider ministry. Last year she came to my parish church in Grimsby, St Giles with St Matthew, and I learned that she has visited other Members’ constituencies—or, in my case, the neighbouring constituency—to preach at their parish church. It was a wonderful occasion, and I know that the whole congregation greatly appreciated it.

As we heard earlier, Rose has varied the Prayers that she says at the beginning of our daily sessions. I am sure that that has caused a few ripples here and there, because the exact prayers that must be said are probably laid down in statute, but it has been extremely helpful and valuable. She is not in the Chamber at the moment, but when I popped out a short while ago, she was providing pastoral care and comfort to a Member. That just shows her devotion to her calling, which I think we would all want to place on record.

Mr Speaker, if you will indulge me for an extra minute or two, I would like to say a few warm words about you. We first met when I was the constituency agent in Gainsborough. I drove you around on various visits, one of which was when I was studying at Lincoln University, and you spoke to the politics group of which I was a member. I can assure you that that went down particularly well. You returned to Lincoln University two or three years ago to give an address. You spotted me in the audience and spoke very warmly about me as a Member. My wife said to me, “He’s going a bit over the top, isn’t he?” and I said, “John going over the top? No, never!” I greatly appreciated that.

You have called me relatively early in the proceedings. One or two of us at this end of the Chamber have, on odd occasions when we have been bobbing up and down, thought that your eyesight may be failing. You have always been particularly courteous to me, and I thank you for that. In particular, this occasion calls for our thanks to Rose. May God go with her.

3.43 pm

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Ind): I shall be very brief. Throughout the time that Rose has been the chaplain to the Commons, it has been abundantly clear that her pastoral skills are outstanding. Those of us who have gone to the monthly communion in St Margaret’s have come to value her fellowship and her company. In addition, we have had the benefit of seeing her around the building and enjoying her pastoral support at times when some of us have needed it.

Like my hon. Friend the Member for Cleethorpes (Martin Vickers), I have had Rose visit my parish to preach, during a time when we had an interregnum between priests. She was something of a star attraction, which showed just how extensive her reach had become in using her chaplaincy of the Commons to spread the gospel and the word that she wanted to put forward in her own way. I will be very sorry at her departure, but I am delighted that the Bishopric of Dover will be available to her, where I am sure her pastoral skills will be used to full measure. I wish to use this opportunity—on behalf of both myself and my wife, who got to know her—to wish her farewell.

Finally, I would just say that Rose was of course your choice, Mr Speaker, which I seem to remember attracted some controversy at the time. As we consider the end of your career here in the House and of your period as Speaker, I would just like to repeat my thanks to you. It is abundantly clear that if you have ruffled feathers, there are some feathers you ruffled for very good reasons. Ten years on, those who look back will conclude that our proceedings and our life in this House were enhanced by many of the things that you did.
Mr Speaker: I am very grateful to the right hon. and learned Gentleman. That is very kind of him, and I take it in that spirit. As he knows, I wish him extremely well. Quite apart from his contributions in the House, the right hon. and learned Gentleman is the most exemplary county colleague that anyone could want. He has been a brilliant colleague for me in Buckinghamshire over the last 22 years, and I salute him.

3.45 pm

Mr Laurence Robertson (Tewkesbury) (Con): At the beginning of my short address, perhaps you will allow me, Mr Speaker, to thank you for and congratulate you on your work. I think we have known each other in excess of a quarter of a century. You have visited my constituency, and you were very helpful to me when I was Chairman of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee. You have championed Back Benchers; I have a long record of being one. I would like to thank you and wish you well for the future.

Mr Speaker, you very kindly allowed me to use your state rooms on the occasion of my wedding reception on 7 February 2015. Mentioning that leads me seamlessly into thanking Rose for her work, because she did me the great honour of marrying my wife Annie and me on that date in the chapel downstairs—St Mary Undercroft. What a wonderful day it was. No one who attended will ever forget it. It still gives us strength and fills us with great affection when we look back at it. I well remember that I had to be interviewed separately, Annie had to be interviewed separately and then we had to be interviewed together before Rose recommended to the Dean of Westminster that we should be allowed to be married, and it was a wonderful occasion. That is my personal recollection.

It has also been wonderful to see Rose in action over the past 10 years. I have attended many services. I tend to go to the one at 12.45 pm in the chapel downstairs, which is immediately after Prime Minister’s questions, to go to the one at 12.45 pm in the chapel downstairs—St Mary Undercroft. It hardly seems credible that, 25 years ago, there was a terrible split in the Church of England about whether to ordain women. That seems incredible thinking back. Those were the most reassuring and illuminating 80 minutes of all the time that I spent talking to people about the difficulties I was facing, and she gave me an enormous amount of reassurance and relief. Rose has an extraordinary knack of knowing what to say. In one of the most difficult times in my life, I happened to bump into her in New Palace Yard. She looked at me from across the yard, pointed at me, and said, “I need to see you.” Although I had not talked to her at all about the difficulties I was facing, she already knew. She had a way of having her finger on the pulse and of knowing who needed help and counsel. Within an hour and a half or two hours, she had made time in her diary, and I spent probably 80 minutes in her study. She set me on the course that I am grateful for. The Church of England often gets a lot of stick, and people worry about the future of our established Church. I believe that so long as people such as Rose are within it, and rising within it, the future of our Church will also be secure.

I endorse the tributes we have already heard. The Church of England often gets a lot of stick, and people worry about the future of our established Church. I believe that so long as people such as Rose are within it, and rising within it, the future of our Church will also be secure.

3.51 pm

Luke Graham (Ochil and South Perthshire) (Con): I appreciate the opportunity to pay a tribute to Rose. Like many in this House, I had experiences here that, when the personal combined with the professional, meant that I found myself having what might professionally be called “a bit of a wobble”—I know that many colleagues from my intake have had similar experiences. The one thing I would say about Rose is this: she was there. Her office is one of duty, but everyone would agree that her performance goes far beyond that. She makes time to see people, and gives them the opportunity to speak. She listens, far beyond the level that her office would necessarily require.

Rose has set an incredible example and a fantastic precedent for new Members and the future chaplain to follow. More broadly, the prayers that she leads before each sitting of the House give us the chance to reflect. In a time when we are constantly on social media and looking at emails, iPads and phones, that gives us a
moment to step back in silence, listen to the words being said and think about the principles that are laid out here and that make this place and make us who we are. That is one of the greatest contributions that Rose has made to this place. Both personally and professionally, Rose has helped all Members strive to become the better part of ourselves while we are here, and I thank her on behalf of myself, my colleagues and our families.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House congratulates the Reverend Prebendary Rose Hudson-Wilkin on her twenty-eight years of ordained ministry in the Church of England, nine years of which have been in the service of Mr Speaker and this House as Chaplain to the Speaker, the first woman and the first BAME holder of that post; expresses its appreciation for the generous, ecumenical and compassionate spirit of her work among hon. Members and staff of the House; and wishes her every success in her forthcoming ministry as Bishop of Dover and Bishop in Canterbury.

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Will you indulge me for a moment? I have a bit of FOMO—fear of missing out—because as a Front Bencher I have not been able to say thank you for everything that you have done in the House. I thank you for all you have done on issues of equality and for not shying away from talking about race. I thank you for all you have done on LGBT+ issues, and for making not shying a way from talking about race. I thank you for all you have done on issues of equality and for not shying a way from talking about race. I thank you for all you have done on issues of equality and for not shying a way from talking about race.

I also want to thank you, Mr Speaker, for bringing Reverend Rose into the House. Hearing everybody’s testament on how she has touched all our lives has been very moving. She has touched my life in many ways. My right hon. Friend the Member for Walsall South (Valerie Vaz) spoke about Labi Siffre. Reverend Rose and I talk verse:

You thought that my pride was gone, oh no
Though you’re doing me wrong, so wrong
I know that I can make it

Something inside so strong
No matter ‘cause there’s
I know that I can make it

To turn your face away
You thought that my pride was gone, oh no
There’s something inside so strong”.

Thank you, Mr Speaker, for being so strong. I thank Reverend Rose for all that she has done for the House, for me and for everybody. Thank you.

Mr Speaker: Well, that was extraordinary and magnificent. I thank the hon. Lady for her excessively generous personal remarks as regards me, but what is much more important is what she said about Rose and I want to underline and reinforce that.

Colleagues, I am extremely grateful to each and every one of you, as we approach the end of this Parliament, for sparing the time and making the commitment to share your experience of and demonstrate your—I was going to say respect for—devotion to the Reverend Rose, who has after all been devoted to us for nine years. In every particular—I say this not so much for colleagues, but for those observing our proceedings—Rose has not just done the job, she has excelled beyond anything that we could reasonably have imagined or contemplated. Her daily commitment is there for all to see, day after day, combining her duties in the Chamber with the responsibility for the conduct of services and the need to attend to St Mary-at-Hill in the City and to interact with large numbers of people on the parliamentary estate.

On big occasions, as so many colleagues have eloquently evidenced, Rose has found the words that needed to be expressed. She has expressed them with feeling and with a transparent and undeniable sincerity. It is that authenticity about her that impresses everybody who hears or meets her. We all know, of course, that a very important part of Rose’s role, as has been referred to by many colleagues during these tributes, is the offer of pastoral care. To Members, to Members’ staff, to the staff of the House, to anyone not employed by the House but contracted to work for it, or to anyone who has reason to be on the parliamentary estate who needs help, Rose has been there to provide that help. It has been a singular and unforgettable contribution.

I certainly do not mind vouchsafing to the House that as well as being aware in many cases of when, how and to what extent Rose helped other colleagues, she has been a terrific source of support, succour and counsel to me. Until my dying day, I will appreciate that support, that succour, that counsel and that camaraderie, which she has been able to provide. Many people have also referred to the circumstances of the terrorist attacks. In those circumstances, we could not have wanted anyone, for the purpose of providing comfort and mitigation of pain, other than Rose.

So many people over the past three years have referred to our departed and beloved colleague, Jo Cox, and someone referred earlier to Birstall in Yorkshire, where the then Prime Minister and the Leader of the Opposition went the day after the appalling murder of Jo. Of course I went as well, but what was really significant was how Rose went, and each of us, the Prime Minister, the Leader of the Opposition and I, observed the impact of Rose’s presence and persona—her love, kindness, compassion and empathy—on people who were experiencing quite unendurable pain. That pain could not be removed, but it could at least be mitigated, and it could be mitigated by no one better than the Reverend Rose. I have a sense, my friends and colleagues, that we are all agreed in this Chamber that the House of Commons’ loss is Canterbury and Dover’s gain.

ADJOURNMENT OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at this day’s sitting,

(1) the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until—

(a) any Message from the Lords has been received and any Committee to draw up Reasons which has been appointed has reported; and

(b) he has reported the Royal Assent to any Act agreed upon by both Houses, and

(2) Standing Order No. 41A shall not apply.—(Rebecca Harris.)
Northern Ireland

Mr Speaker: We now come to motion No. 4 on Northern Ireland. It says in the dossier “Minister to move”, but we have an upgrade, as the Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office, observes from a sedentary position. I call not merely any Minister, but the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, no less.

4.2 pm

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Julian Smith): I beg to move,

That the Northern Ireland (Extension of Period for Executive Formation) (No. 2) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 1364), which were laid before this House on 21 October, be approved.

I just wanted to add to my tribute yesterday to your speakership by saying something about the Education Centre, Mr Speaker. During my comments, I did not mention all the amazing feedback that I have had from my constituents on the centre, which you were so key to developing. Listening to the tributes that have been paid to you, it seems to me that you will have limitless wish, over the coming years.

Having sought the House’s approval for the Northern Ireland Budget Bill yesterday, I now seek the House’s approval for this equally vital statutory instrument. I announced on 21 October an extension of the period for Executive formation to 13 January 2020. That is the only extension permitted under the terms of the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation etc) Act 2019, and I have no discretion as to the length of the extension.

I took the decision because, despite relentless engagement over the summer with the political parties and the Irish Government, the political parties have not been able to reach the accommodation that we know they need to reach to form the Assembly and the Executive. I was disappointed to have to take this approach and extend the period, but failing to extend the period and leaving it to expire at the end of 21 October would have severely constrained the ability of the Northern Ireland civil service to make decisions in the absence of Ministers. It would also have precipitated an Assembly election. That would not have been the right approach for Northern Ireland at this time.

I am pleased that, in the last week, the Northern Ireland political parties have indicated a willingness both within and outside this place to restore the institutions. There will be a short window after the general election, and before the 13 January deadline, when talks should be convened. I hope that both parties will engage seriously. As I have said in this House many times, the remaining issues are soluble if the will is there. These regulations ensure it is possible to undertake that swift work once a new Administration is formed in December. I will remain in close contact with all political parties in Northern Ireland throughout the election period, and I am sure the whole House will join me in urging the parties, particularly Sinn Féin and the DUP, to show leadership and to be ready to restore the institutions. I commend these regulations to the House.

4.4 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): The Secretary of State knows that it is inevitably with considerable regret on both sides of the House that we once again confront the need for these regulations to be passed. Come the 13 January deadline, Northern Ireland will have been without an Assembly and Executive for about 1,100 days, if by then there is still no newly formed Executive or Assembly in operation. I hope the general election campaign will be conducted in Great Britain and—even more importantly—in Northern Ireland with the kind of decorum that does not entrench antagonism between people and that we come out of it more likely to reach agreement in this Parliament, yes, but most certainly in Stormont. Elections can be healing, but they can also of course be divisive.

I do not plan to say an awful lot more. The Secretary of State and I, and the Minister and the shadow Minister, have debated these issues many times. We could once again talk about the paucity of decision making that bedevils Northern Ireland, the things that are not being done and the problems this causes. Those things are a matter of record. It is important that there is continuity of Executive function over the next weeks and in particular that the Secretary of State does not find himself in the extraordinary position of having to call an election during that period.

I do not think the House has any ambitions to do anything other than pass these regulations, but I am bound to finish on the following note. We are now at the end of the road for this particular process. Whatever follows in the new year has to be more creative—let me use that word—and the creativity may be the creation of an Executive and a Northern Ireland Assembly that functions.

4.7 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I will not detain the House for long. It is with some regret that we reach this decision, but we understand why the Secretary of State is bringing forward these regulations. He has to bring them forward—it is logical to do so—to the Chamber today and to extend the timescale. It is vital that, after the general election on 12 December and the run-up to it, and after that the discussions to find a way forward, we can engage again, including in the new year.

At the DUP’s party conference this Saturday past, our leader, Arlene Foster, made several suggestions that could lead to discussions being engaged in again. They were constructive comments; they were meant to be. They were positive comments from the point of view that we wish to find a way forward for the Northern Ireland Assembly to engage. The leader has done that very well.

We debated the budget Bill last night in the Chamber. We all understand the issues for the budget in Northern Ireland and why it is important that those decisions be made by the Northern Ireland Assembly. I would be very pleased to report to the Chamber that the Assembly was back up and running. There is one thing we all agree on, and that is that we all think that that is the way forward.

I do not want to be entirely critical of other political parties, but I will say this: our party, the Democratic Unionist party, is willing and able and will be at Stormont on Monday morning, or whatever Monday morning, to engage in the political process and move forward. I would encourage Sinn Féin to have the same understanding of how the process works. This election will perhaps
delay that. It is better that we do what we are doing and then after we can move forward, hopefully with a constructive attitude. Certainly the DUP will be of that mind. We hope that Sinn Féin will be as well.

Question put and agreed to.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): Before I invite the Minister to move the motion to approve these regulations, I should inform the House that the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments considered them at its meeting yesterday and agreed to draw them to the attention of the House. The relevant extract of the Committee’s report is available in the Vote Office.

4.10 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): I beg to move,

That the draft Civil Partnership (Opposite-sex Couples) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 21 October, be approved.

In what has been an emotionally charged and very moving day in the Chamber, this statutory instrument is, I hope, a cause for celebration, as it allows opposite-sex couples in England and Wales to form civil partnerships. This Government want to see more people formalise their relationships in the way they want with the person they love. We know that there are over 3 million opposite-sex couples who cohabit but choose not to marry. Those couples support 1 million children, but do not have the security or legal protection that married couples or civil partners enjoy.

That is why we announced last year that we would extend civil partnerships to opposite-sex couples and why we supported the Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration etc) Act 2019, which was taken so ably through Parliament by my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton). The regulations are before the House. In short, section 2 of the Act enables the Secretary of State by regulation to amend the eligibility criteria for civil partnerships to make other appropriate and consequential provision. The Act requires the regulations extending eligibility to come into force no later than 31 December 2019.

These regulations, as Madam Deputy Speaker said, have been expedited in their consideration by both Houses. I am extremely grateful to the Joint Committee on Statutory Instruments, which considered them yesterday. In particular, the chairmanship of the hon. Member for Newport East (Jessica Morden) was helpful in understanding the urgency of this statutory instrument.

I will outline briefly the concerns of the Committee and the response of the Government to those concerns. Our approach on conversion—that is, conversion from marriage to civil partnership and vice versa—maintains a difference between opposite-sex and same-sex couples in their ability to convert their civil partnerships into marriages. Importantly, those two groups are not in a directly comparable position. The right to convert a civil partnership to marriage was introduced to enable same-sex couples to marry without having to dissolve their civil partnerships as marriage had historically been denied to them. That same consideration does not apply to opposite-sex civil partners, who will always have been able to marry.

Even if same-sex and opposite-sex couples can be compared, the Government consider that maintaining the status quo in the short term is justified. Extending conversion rights to allow opposite-sex couples to convert
their civil partnership to marriage now, while we are considering responses to the consultation, would risk creating uncertainty and confusion about future rights. We do not wish to introduce a new, potentially short-term conversion right that might subsequently be withdrawn in 2020.

Once we have made civil partnerships available to opposite-sex couples, our priority will be to resolve our longer-term position on conversion rights for all civil partners and to bring forward further regulations as soon as possible next year. I hope this reassures hon. Members that we have considered these issues carefully and we consider the regulations to be compliant with the Human Rights Act 1998.

Let me again pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for East Worthing and Shoreham, and also to Baroness Hodgson of Abinger, for their skill and tenacity in driving the Act through Parliament. I know that my hon. Friend has been invited to a civil partnership ceremony which the happy couple hope will take place on 31 December. We intend to implement the regulations on 2 December, which would enable the first opposite-sex civil partnership ceremonies to take place on 31 December; given the usual 28-day notice period. I very much hope that my hon. Friend will be able to make those celebrations.

I know how long some opposite-sex couples have waited for the opportunity to formalise their relationships, and to enjoy the stability, rights and entitlements that other couples enjoy. This is the final legislative step in the process, and I look forward to the first opposite-sex civil partnerships being formed by the end of the year.

I hope, Mr Speaker, that you will allow me a moment away from the important issue of civil partnerships, so that I can play my part in the tributes to you on your last day in that very special seat in the House. It is indeed an honour to be at the Dispatch Box today, and, of course, to hear the wonderful tributes to your chaplain, Rose. May I thank you personally for your service as Speaker of the House over the last 10 years?

As I was preparing for this debate, I sat in our wonderful House of Commons Library. Around the ceiling of one of the rooms are 30 wooden panels containing the names of every single Speaker, dating from 1377 to 2009, when you were sworn in. Your impact on this place will be present not just on those wooden panels in the Library, but in the day-to-day business and interactions of the House. Having sat here in the Chamber hearing some of the tributes to you—which have ranged from the very personal and very serious to some more light-hearted and fond recollections—I will, if I may, add one of my own. I consider it to be one of the achievements of my parliamentary career; it may, in fact, be the only achievement of my parliamentary career. By describing the name of my cat, I caused you to stand up and say:

“I am as near to speechless as I have ever been.”—[Official Report, 20 December 2018; Vol. 651, c. 984.]

Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for everything that you have done for the House, but also for me, at the Dispatch Box and also as a Back Bencher. I wish you, and your loved ones, the very best for your future.

Mr Speaker: Does the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) wish to speak in the debate?

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I do.

Mr Speaker: Just before I put the Question, I want to say, by way of response to the Minister, a big thank you. That was a very generous and gracious tribute from her. If I may return the compliment—and I think it is relevant to the whole question of the language of discourse—let me say that the hon. Lady has perfected the art of disagreeing agreeably. She is a brilliant advocate of her case, and a very highly respected and rising member of the Government. It is obvious that, in conducting debates in the Chamber, she relishes the political argument, the analysis of policy, the competing claims and so on, but in my experience—and I have heard her speak many times at that Dispatch Box—when engaging in debate, she always plays the ball rather than the man or the woman, and that is to her enduring credit. I reciprocate her very warm wishes: I wish her all the best.

4.18 pm

Dawn Butler (Brent Central) (Lab): I welcome the regulations, and I congratulate the hon. Member for East Worthing and Shoreham (Tim Loughton) on his campaign. I too called for the law to be changed, so I am delighted that the Government are finally introducing legislation that will put everyone on an equal footing.

Last year, I pointed out: “The Government should have already legislated to ensure all couples have equality of choice.” At the time, I called on the Government to “take action and change the law to ensure all people have access to civil partnerships”.

I have no idea why it took so long. I have no idea why the Lib Dems and the Conservatives did not want this to happen a lot sooner. It was over a year ago—16 months, in fact—that the Supreme Court ruled that restricting civil partnerships to same-sex couples was discriminatory. The judges ruled that current UK laws were incompatible with human rights laws on discrimination and the right to a private and family life, so there was no reason for the delay. As the Minister said, there are 3.2 million cohabiting opposite-sex couples, and this is unfortunately another example of the Government dragging their feet on equality. Maybe it is a result of all the changes in Ministers and all the upheaval, but this foot-dragging on equality is unnecessary and quite costly. The Government seem to be letting a lot of people down when it comes to equality.

This change only came about because of the brave steps taken by Rebecca Steinfeld and Charles Keidan. In October 2014, the London couple tried to form a civil partnership at their local registry office in Chelsea Town Hall, but they were told that they could not do so because they were not a same-sex couple. They bravely took their case all the way to the Supreme Court, but they should not have had to do that. I would like to remind the House what Ms Steinfeld said outside the court. She said:

“We are feeling elated... But at the same time we are feeling frustrated the government has wasted taxpayers’ money in fighting what the judges have called a blatant inequality.”

When the Minister gets to her feet, perhaps she could explain to the House how much it cost the taxpayer to take this to court. It was the Lib Dem-Tory Government
who decided not to do anything at a time when they could have just changed the law; if they had done so, we would not have had to go through all this.

As I have said, I am pleased with this decision, as it will give cohabiting opposite-sex couples the recognition that they deserve. It will provide stability and security, and ultimately allow couples to decide what is right for them in their relationship. It will give stability to families and children. I am looking forward to the election, because I hope that we will then be able to form a Government with a stand-alone Department for Women and Equalities and be able to push equality issues a lot faster than we have seen over the past 10 years.

4.22 pm

Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con): I have a bit of a sense of déjà vu all over again on this Bill. It has been a long journey getting here, but this is a happy day that will lead to very many happy days for happy couples, starting on 31 December. I will be going out to buy a new hat in anticipation of those events shortly. Before I make my brief comments and put some specific questions to the Minister, however, I just want to take issue with the hon. Member for Brent Central (Dawn Butler). It is a shame that the Opposition Front Bench has taken a slightly churlish attitude in this debate. There is a simple response to her question as to why this has taken so long. Very simply, it is because, having promised me that they would vote for it, Labour Members voted against the amendment to the Marriage (Same Sex Couples) Act 2013 that would have achieved this several years ago. So she might like to look to her own side before she tries to cast aspersions on what has been a magnificent effort by the Government to get here today.

Sir Edward Leigh (Gainsborough) (Con): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend. I have been campaigning on this for many years. I was approached by two sisters at the time of the passing of the original Civil Partnership Act 2004 by Tony Blair. The sisters had lived together for many years and faced being evicted and losing their home because they could not have a civil partnership. Will my hon. Friend say a bit more about that particular case?

Tim Loughton: That would probably be stretching out of order, but I appreciate that my hon. Friend took up the issue before I did. It is a cause with which I have some sympathy, and there have been measures in the other place for a Bill on that topic. This legislation is about couples and relationships and recognition and protections that are not available. The matters to which he refers, which relate particularly to siblings who are living together and are entirely dependent on each other, are largely financial ones, and that should be addressed in financial legislation. I would absolutely support him if that were to happen in the future.

I just want to pay some tributes, because this might not have happened today. If this debate had not happened before the end of this Parliament, the necessary regulations that form part of the 2019 Act, which received Royal Assent back on 26 March, would not have been completed in time for the first civil partnerships between opposite-sex couples to take place, as promised, before the end of this year. I am therefore grateful to the Chief Whip, the usual channels, the Minister, the Statutory Instruments Committee, which met hurriedly yesterday, and the officials, who worked tirelessly in order to get us to where we are today. Otherwise, the promises that we made to the people who were looking forward to having their happy day on 31 December might not have been kept.

I have constantly stated that many register offices around the country have been taking provisional bookings for civil partnerships, including on the very last day of this year. A lot is hinging on this, and many people will be watching these proceedings and the news that comes out. The issue was that, in order for civil partnerships to take place by the end of this year, the regulations had to be laid and then there is a minimum of 28 days—it is not really a cooling-off period—between a couple registering their interest in a civil partnership before it is able to be conducted. That meant that if the regulations had not been approved before 2 December, that process could not have been gone through. I am therefore grateful to the Government, because it was always a big thing for me that this should happen this year, rather than be yet further delay. The Minister, true to her word, was able to persuade the powers that be to agree to that. I am grateful to all the officials and Ministers who have made this possible.

It is something of an honour that this will be the last piece of debatable business in this Parliament and the last debatable business that you will oversee, Mr Speaker. You have been a big supporter of this change, although you would never admit it and show any degree of partiality, but I know, unofficially, that you have got behind this change, which has been of great help and comfort to people outside this House who see this as an obvious equality measure that should have happened some time ago.

The process has been expedited, but I just have a few brief questions for the Minister. First, will she confirm—I think she already has—that the fact that we are debating this well before 2 December does not mean that the 28 days start from today? If so, we may need to expedite the purchase of hats before the end of November, rather than the end of December, but I think she has confirmed that the earliest that the first civil partnership ceremony can take place will be 31 December 2019 for those who have registered their interest by 2 December. Emergency civil partnerships are an exception and, as happened with civil partnerships between same-sex couples back in 2014, could be approved in a matter of hours or days after 2 December. Some people who have been part of the equal-partner civil partnerships campaign and who have terminal illnesses are very much looking for the change to happen as soon as possible. Perhaps the Minister can confirm that for the benefit of those for whom the date is particularly crucial. Could the Minister also confirm the status of opposite-sex civil partnerships registered outside England and Wales, for example, on the Isle of Man, which was the first part of the British Isles to approve opposite-sex civil partnerships and where key people involved in the campaign have undergone a civil partnership? Will their civil partnership be recognised in our law from 2 December or 31 December, or will this still be contingent on further work on regulations that needs to take place?

I fully appreciate that this measure is not the end of the story; this enables new opposite-sex couples to engage in a new civil partnership and there is much
work still to be done on the conversion for those who are already married, just as there was a conversion the other way round in respect of civil partnerships for same-sex couples. Looking through the regulations, which are detailed and technical, I appreciate the work that has gone into everything from gender recognition to the status of children, the warm home discount and digital switchover. All that legislation, extraordinarily, has to be considered in these regulations in order to get this right. Will the Minister therefore clarify the status of existing overseas or ex-England opposite-sex civil partnerships?

Will the Minister also issue guidance as soon as possible to registrars around the country that they should be open for business from 2 December? There has been confusion as to whether this would happen and some registrars, the more far-sighted ones, have been taking provisional waiting lists as from 31 December, whereas others have said, “It’s not happening, so don’t call us, we’ll call you after 31 December.” It is important that clear instructions are now issued. If she could signal from the Dispatch Box as well, that would be helpful, because people need to prepare. People who have been waiting years and years for this day to happen want to be able to get on with it, and we need to ensure that registrars know what they are doing in order to facilitate their request.

Finally, let me say that this is just but one part of my Civil Partnerships, Marriages and Deaths (Registration etc) Act 2019. There are three other parts to it. I raised the issue of mothers’ names on marriage certificates with the Second Church Estates Commissioner, which has yet to be resolved by formal regulations. The second issue is about the Secretary of State giving the go-ahead for coroners to have the power to investigate stillbirths. The last issue is the review of sub-24-week stillbirths. They are all important parts of my multifaceted Act that still require further regulations. I appreciate that today we are dealing purely with the civil partnerships part of it, but it would be helpful if the Minister gave some indication that work is ongoing on those other important parts of this Act.

Once again, may I thank the Minister in particular for expediting these measures today, just in the nick of time? For many hundreds of couples up and down the country waiting on this, it is a really important and happy development.

4.33 pm

Victoria Atkins: As always, my hon. Friend asks me many questions. I sometimes think he is doing it in the hope of catching me out, so I am going to do my best to prove him wrong. The date on which the regulations come into force is set out in regulation 1(2) and they will be very much in force on 2 December, so that the 28 days’ notice can be in force for civil partnerships on 31 December, with the exception, as he rightly points out, in respect of emergency applications.

On overseas civil partnerships, overseas relationships can be recognised as civil partnerships in England and Wales if they meet the conditions set out in the Act. Opposite-sex couples who formed a civil partnership on the Isle of Man will be recognised as civil partners in England and Wales on the day these regulations come into force—in other words, from 2 December. I should say that the regulations include a list of specified overseas relationships that will be treated as civil partnerships here, but other overseas relationships can also be recognised as civil partnerships if they meet general conditions.

Yes, the General Register Office will issue clear guidance to local registration services about the commencement of the new scheme. I do not have a date to hand, but when I discover one, I will write to my hon. Friend.

On the other matters in the Bill, I am delighted to confirm that the General Register Office is currently working on the secondary legislation, IT systems and administrative processes required to implement the marriage schedule system. Officials are working with the Church of England and the Church in Wales on the details of the proposals, and a timescale will be announced in due course. I am keen that we help to get mums’ names on to marriage certificates as soon as possible.

I hope that my hon. Friend will forgive me in respect of the other matters he raised. We have concentrated on civil partnerships, so I will have to write to him on the other two matters—he caught me out on those two.

Question put and agreed to.

ROYAL ASSENT

Mr Speaker: I have to notify the House, in accordance with the Royal Assent Act 1967, that Her Majesty has signified her Royal Assent to the following Acts:

Early Parliamentary General Election Act 2019

Business without Debate

DELEGATED LEGISLATION

Mr Speaker: We come now to a series of motions that I think we should take separately, for reasons that will become obvious. Before I invite a Whip to move motion 6, which is the first in the sequence, I must announce my decision on certification for the purposes of Standing Order No. 83P—“Certification of instruments”. On the basis of material put before me, I certify that, in my opinion, the instrument does not meet the criteria required for certification under that Standing Order.

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

INCOME TAX

That the draft Income Tax (Trading and Other Income) Act 2005 (Amendments to Chapter 2A of Part 5) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 14 October, be approved.—(Leo Docherty.)

Question agreed to.

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

REPRESENTATION OF THE PEOPLE

That the draft Representation of the People (Annual Canvass) (Amendment) Regulations 2019, which were laid before this House on 14 October, be approved.—(Leo Docherty.)

The House divided: Ayes 206, Noes 33.
**Division No. 17**

**[4.37 pm]**

**AYES**

- Afolami, Bim
- Afriyie, Adam
- Aitch, Michael
- Amond, Peter
- Amess, Sir David
- Andrews, Dame Victoria
- Argar, Edward
- Atkins, Victoria
- Bacon, Sir Richard
- Badenoch, Mrs Kemi (Proxy vote cast by Leo Docherty)
- Baker, Mr Steve
- Baldwin, Harriett
- Barclay, Rh Stephen
- Bellingham, Sir Henry
- Beresford, Sir Paul
- Berry, Rh Jake
- Blackman, Bob
- Blunt, Crispin
- Bone, Sir Peter
- Bottomley, Sir Peter
- Brady, Sir Graham
- Braverman, Suella (Proxy vote cast by Mr Steve Baker)
- Bridge, Andrew
- Broker, Rh James
- Bruce, Fiona
- Buckland, Sir Robert
- Burghart, Alex
- Burns, Rh Conor
- Burt, Rh Alistair
- Cartlidge, James
- Cash, Rh William
- Caufield, Maria
- Churchill, Jo
- Clark, Rh Greg
- Clarke, Sir Simon
- Cleverly, Rh James
- Clifton-Brown, Sir Geoffrey
- Coffey, Rh Dr Therese
- Courts, Robert
- Cox, Rh Mr Geoffrey
- Davies, Mims
- Davies, Philip
- Djanogly, Rh Mr Jonathan
- Docherty, Leo
- Dorries, Ms Nadine
- Double, Steve
- Dowden, Rh Oliver
- Doyle-Price, Jackie
- Duddridge, James
- Duguid, David
- Duncan Smith, Rh Mr Iain
- Dunne, Rh Mr Philip
- Ellis, Rh Michael
- Elphicke, Charlie
- Eustice, George
- Evans, Mr Nigel
- Evennett, Rh Sir David
- Fabrick, 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
- Gale, Rh Sir Roger
- Garnier, Mark
- Ghan, Ms Nusrat
- Gibb, Rh Nick
- Gillan, Rh Dame Cheryl
- Glen, John
- Goldsmidh, Rh Zac
- Gove, Rh Michael
- Graham, Luke
- Graham, Richard
- Grant, Bill
- Greening, Rh Justine
- Griffiths, Andrew
- Hall, Luke
- Hancock, Rh Matt
- Hands, Rh Greg
- Harris, Rebecca
- Harrison, Trudy
- Hayes, Rh Sir John
- Heald, Rh Sir Oliver
- Heappey, James
- Heaton-Harris, Chris
- Heaton-Jones, Peter
- Henderson, Gordon
- Herbert, Rh Nick
- Hinds, Rh Damian
- Hollinrake, Kevin
- Hollobone, Rh Michael
- Holloway, Adam
- Howell, John
- Hughes, Eddie
- Hunt, Rh Mr Jeremy
- Hurd, Rh Mr Nick
- Jack, Rh Mr Alister
- Javid, Rh Sajid
- Jayawardena, Rh Manilal
- Jenkin, Sir Bernard
- Jennick, Rh Robert
- Johnson, Dr Caroline
- Johnson, Gareth
- Jones, Andrew
- Jones, Rh Mr David
- Jones, Mr Marcus
- Kacwyczinski, Daniel
- Keegan, Gillian
- Kerr, Stephen
- Kwartaung, Rh Kwasi
- Lancaster, Rh Mark
- Latham, Mrs Pauline
- Leadsom, Rh Andrea
- LeFebre, Jeremy
- Leigh, Rh Sir Edward
- Letwin, Rh Sir Oliver
- Lewer, Andrew
- Lewis, Rh Brandon
- Lewis, Rh Dr Julian
- Liddington, Rh Sir David
- Lopez, Julia (Proxy vote cast by Lee Rowley)
- Lord, Rh Ms Jonathan
- Loughton, Rh Tim
- Mackinlay, Craig
- Maclean, Rachel
- Mak, Alan
- Malthouse, Kit
- Mann, Rh Scott
- May, Rh Mrs Theresa
- McEwen, Rh Ms Esther
- Menzies, Mark
- Merriman, Huw
- Metcalfe, Stephen
- Milling, Amanda
- Mills, Nigel
- Moore, Damien
- Mordaunt, Rh Penny
- Morgan, Rh Nicky
- Morris, David
- Morris, James
- Morton, Rh Wendy
- Murray, Mrs Sheryl
- Murrison, Rh Dr Andrew
- Neil, Rh Robert
- Newton, Sarah
- Norman, Jesse
- Opperman, Rh Edd
- Patel, Rh Priti
- Penning, Rh Sir Mike
- Penrose, John
- Percy, Andrew
- Philip, Rh Chris
- Pincher, Rh Christopher
- Poultier, Dr Dan
- Pow, Rh Rebecca
- Prisk, Rh Mark
- Purgrove, Rh Tom
- Quin, Rh Jeremy
- Quince, Will
- Raab, Rh Dominic
- Rees-Mogg, Rh Mr Jacob
- Robertson, Rh Laurence
- Robinson, Mr Richard
- Rosindell, Rh Andrew
- Rowley, Rh Lee
- Rutley, Rh David
- Scully, Rh Paul
- Seely, Rh Mr Bob
- Shapps, Rh Grant
- Sharma, Rh Alok
- Shetlerbrooke, Rh Alec
- Smith, Chloe
- Smith, Rh Julian
- Soames, Rh Sir Nicholas
- Spelman, Rh Dame Caroline
- Spencer, Rh Mark
- Stephenson, Rh Andrew
- Stewart, Bob
- Stewart, Rh Ian
- Stride, Rh Mr
- Sunak, Rh Rishi
- Swarne, Rh Sir Desmond
- Throup, Maggie
- Tolhurst, Rh Kelly
- Tomlinson, Rh Michael
- Tracey, Rh Craig
- Trevelyan, Anne-Marie
- Truss, Rh Elizabeth
- Tugendhat, Rh Tom
- Vara, Mr Shailesh
- Vickers, Rh Martin
- Villiers, Rh Theresa
- Walker, Mr Charles
- Walker, Mr Rhin
- Wallace, Rh Mr Ben
- Warman, Rh Matt
- Watling, Rh Giles
- Whately, Rh Helen
- Wheeler, Mrs Heather
- Whittingdale, Rh Mr John
- Williamson, Rh Gavin
- Wood, Rh Mike
- Wright, Rh Jeremy

**NOES**

- Alin, Rhushanara
- Antoniazzi, Rh Tonia
- Ashworth, Rh Jonathan
- Blackman-Woods, Dr Rh Roberta
- Brown, Rh Mr Nicholas
- Burgon, Rh Richard
- Butler, Dawn
- Campbell, Rh Sir Alan
- Carmichael, Rh Mr Alistair
- Creasy, Rh Stella
- Dakin, Rh Nic
- Duffield, Rosie
- Fletcher, Rh Colleen
- Green, Rh Kate
- Griffiths, Rh Nia
- Gregan, Rh John
- Hucz, Dr Rupa
- Johnson, Rh Diana
- Lloyd, Rh Tony
- Malhotra, Seema
- Martin, Rh Sandy
- Matheson, Rh Christian
- Mclnnes, Rh Liz
- Peacock, Stephanie
- Platt, Rh Jo
- Pound, Rh Stephen
- Robinson, Rh Mr Geoffrey
- Sherriff, Rh Paula
- Shuker, Mr Gavin
- Timms, Rh Stephen
- Twigg, Rh Stephen
- Vaz, Rh Valerie
- Whitehead, Rh Alain

**Tellers for the Ayes:**

- Michelle Donelan and Nigel Huddleston

**Tellers for the Noes:**

- Thangam Debbonaire and Jeff Smith

**Question accordingly agreed to.**

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

**Local Government**

That the draft Newcastle Upon Tyne, North Tyneside and Northumberland Combined Authority (Adult Education Functions) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 22 July 2019, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved. —[Leo Docherty.]**

**Question agreed to.**

**Motion made, and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 118(6)).**
PREVENTION AND SUPPRESSION OF TERRORISM

That the draft Terrorism Act 2000 (Proscribed Organisations) (Amendment) (No. 2) Order 2019, which was laid before this House on 22 July 2019, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—[Leo Docherty.]

Question agreed to.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (ANIMALS)

That the Welfare of Animals at the Time of Killing (England and Northern Ireland) (Amendment) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 1308), dated 7 October 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 7 October 2019, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—[Leo Docherty.]

Question agreed to.

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

EXITING THE EUROPEAN UNION (AGRICULTURE)

That the Agriculture, Environment and Rural Affairs (Amendment) (Northern Ireland) (EU Exit) (No. 2) Regulations 2019 (S.I., 2019, No. 1313), dated 7 October 2019, a copy of which was laid before this House on 7 October 2019, in the last Session of Parliament, be approved.—[Leo Docherty.]

Question agreed to.

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

Mr Speaker: I do not think that that requires any response from me, other than to say that the hon. Gentleman has made his point with great clarity. It will have been heard, and he will have to await events.

PETITION

Ipswich Northern Bypass

4.57 pm

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): Mr Speaker, may I briefly pay tribute to your diligent stewardship of the House in the nine years or so that I have been here and to all you have done to modernise the procedures of this place, while maintaining appropriate traditions? I am sure that I echo the comments made by many others earlier in the day.

The petition of residents in my constituency rejects any and all proposals by Suffolk County Council and its leader, Councillor Matthew Hicks, for an Ipswich northern bypass. The petition is ongoing, but since late July 2019, it has already received 5,372 signatures. I am particularly grateful to Nick Green, Nick Deacon, Gerard Pearce, Amy Waspe and everyone in the Stop! campaign for all their dedication and hard work in collecting signatures for this petition.

Residents in both north Ipswich and the rural villages that I represent recognise that there is little or no evidence to support the building of the bypass, and that the many thousands of extra homes that would need to be built to fund it will further increase traffic congestion and pollution in Ipswich. Importantly, an Ipswich northern bypass will do little to improve traffic flow in and around Ipswich for the few hours every year that the Orwell bridge is closed. The environmental damage that would be caused by the bypass is inconsistent with Suffolk County Council declaring a climate emergency and its desire to become the greenest county.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government and the Department of Transport to press upon Suffolk County Council and its Leader Cllr Matthew Hicks for the need to reject proposals for an Ipswich Northern Bypass, and to bring forward properly evidence based and environmentally sustainable solutions to decongesting central Ipswich.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of North Ipswich, Kesgrave, Rushmere St Andrew, Claydon, Grundisburgh, Westerfield, Hasketon and villages in the Central Suffolk and North Ipswich Constituency,]

Declares that Suffolk's residents reject any and all proposals by Suffolk County Council and its Leader Cllr Matthew Hicks for an Ipswich Northern Bypass; further that residents recognise that there is little or no evidence to support the building of the Bypass and that the many thousands of extra houses that would need to be built to fund the bypass will increase traffic congestion and pollution in Ipswich, recognises that an Ipswich Northern year that the Orwell Bridge is closed, acknowledges that the environmental damage that would be caused by the Bypass is inconsistent with Suffolk County Council declaring a climate emergency and its desire to become the Greenest County Council; further recognises that Suffolk's local authorities have already identified an evidence based housing land supply until around 2035 and therefore...
rejects proposals for any additional houses to be built in the East Suffolk and Mid Suffolk District Council areas in order to fund the Bypass; and further that this petition is on-going but since late July 2019 has already received 5372 signatories from both residents of North Ipswich and rural Suffolk.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government and the Department of Transport to press upon Suffolk County Council and its Leader Cllr Matthew Hicks for the need to reject proposals for an Ipswich Northern Bypass, and to bring forward properly evidence based and environmentally sustainable solutions to decongesting central Ipswich.

And the petitioners remain, etc.]

597 598

31 OCTOBER 2019

Business without Debate

Housing Succession Policy

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

5 pm

Rushanara Ali (Bethnal Green and Bow) (Lab): Mr Speaker, it is a real privilege to see you sitting in the Chair for this debate, as it will be the last time that you do so. I join colleagues on both sides of the House in the tributes they have paid to you today and previously. I also want to pay a personal tribute to you for all your work to transform this House for the better. You have also championed our values of equality, fairness and justice, and you have stood up against those who seek to inflame division and hatred in our country, including one President. When the question of inviting him to this House came up, you rightly pointed out that we have a reputation to uphold of being against racism and sexism, and of standing up for equality before an independent judiciary. I am summarising what you said, but it is important that we remember the courage and bravery with which you held to those standards.

I hope that whoever succeeds you, Mr Speaker, will build on your work and legacy, will have the courage to stand up for what is right and decent, will hold the Executive to account, and will stand up for the sovereignty of our Parliament. From the bottom of my heart, thank you for everything you have done and all the support you have provided to Members on both sides of the House.

I also want to pay tribute to Rev. Rose Hudson-Wilkin for all that she has done, as this is also her last day. She has contributed much to this country, particularly here in Parliament and, of course, in my part of London. We wish her the very best of luck in her new role.

This debate is about the policy of succession in social housing. Social housing, whether council housing or social landlord housing, is the bedrock of successful communities in my constituency of Bethnal Green and Bow as well as many other parts of the country. It is important to remind ourselves of the original purpose of social housing, because it was not only to provide a safety net for the poorest people, or a last resort for the most vulnerable and those desperately in need. The purpose of social housing was to provide safe, stable and affordable homes, often close to city centres and sources of work—for all on middle and low incomes as an alternative to rip-off rents and exploitation. That need has not gone away. The principle should be maintained, but it has been under threat for a very long time.

Social housing is about not just homes but communities in which the same families live through the life cycle while growing together, helping each other out, putting down roots and building a real community spirit. That is the spirit of the social housing in my constituency, as it has been for generations. It has been a springboard for social mobility, aspiration and success. As the then Housing Minister, Nye Bevan, said, the goal was

“the living tapestry of a mixed community”.—[Official Report, 16 March 1949; Vol. 462, c. 2127.]
Our goal should be mixed communities with people of different incomes and backgrounds living among one another, not monocultures or sink estates.

Social housing provides security and stability, and part of that stability has been the right to pass tenure from parent to child, if needed. Under the Conservative-led coalition Government of 2010 to 2015, this right was severely undermined, and I believe that that has done serious damage to people in my constituency and many others across the country.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Lady on securing the debate. I have been a great supporter of social housing over the years and I understand exactly the point she is making. Does she not agree that associations need the legal capability to have limited discretion so that qualified and experienced staff can use their wisdom and discernment to ensure that there can be as just a succession policy as possible—in other words, to make it possible?

Rushanara Ali: I very much agree with that point. People need to be given the right advice about the legal framework when they apply so that mistakes are not made, and I will come on to mention some of those.

Individuals in public organisations such as housing associations and local authorities find themselves in the very difficult position that while they feel they have to apply the law, that law itself is flawed, which is why we need action from the Government.

Section 160 of the Localism Act 2011 ended the right of those who are not spouses or civil partners to succeed to secure tenancies that were agreed after 1 April 2012. The Act passed responsibility for decision making to local authorities, and clear central guidance has meant that many more bereaved children have faced eviction after the death of their parent. In the depths of their grief, they have had to fight bureaucracy, and often legal threats, just to stay in their homes, all the while dealing with the consequences of losing a family member.

Guidance on the allocation of accommodation for local authorities was issued in 2002. It includes guidance on when it might be appropriate to grant a tenancy to members of a household. For example, that could be when someone has been living with a tenant for a year prior to that tenant’s death, when they have provided care, or when they have accepted responsibility for the tenant’s dependants and need to live in the family home. There are many example of caring responsibilities that people have fulfilled over many years, and such people should not be treated in such a way.

The whole House will understand why, when left to their own devices, local authorities prioritise those in need on the housing waiting list. They are often placed in an impossibly difficult situation and need to make difficult choices. However, that does not balance out the needs of vulnerable people who are at risk of being made homeless, and who are treated inhumanely and unsympathetically at a time of bereavement.

No one suggests that large family homes should be occupied by single tenants—the 2002 guidance makes that clear—or that the rent book should stay with the same family in perpetuity. As the MP for Bethnal Green and Bow, I know all too well the desperate need for more affordable homes, and for an end to overcrowding and appalling housing conditions. The rationing of housing has meant that even in those cases, people are threatened with eviction because of changes made in the Localism Act 2011. Surely that is an unintended and pernicious consequence of the Act, but the way it has been interpreted by local councils and housing associations means that people face homelessness at the very time when they need support from the state and solace, rather than having to think about whether they will be allowed to live in their homes. If ever there was a need for a humane and flexible approach, it is this.

I have had to deal with so many cases over the past few years. Families with caring responsibilities have had to fight multiple eviction notices having just buried family members. Older children have given up their own council properties, because they could not afford private accommodation or to buy, and have moved in to look after a parent for many years. They are then faced with eviction when that parent dies.

One constituent moved out of his own council property to care for his father, who suffered from a number of health issues. She feels that the EastendHomes housing association applied discretion appropriately, but she now faces eviction.

There have been so many cases where constituents of mine have been wrongly served eviction notices in the circumstances of bereavement. I even had a case where a constituent came to my surgery who, having just lost her partner of 19 years, was told, wrongly, that she could not succeed to his tenancy. In one case, the combination of an eviction threat and a bereavement faced by my constituent, after having cared for her mother for over a decade, was driving her to the edge of a nervous breakdown. She was worried about bailiffs coming to her house—she had received eviction notices—and that she would be thrown out. The only thing I could offer her was that I would go there and stand with her, and do whatever was needed to help her so that she did not get seriously ill as a result of the pressure and, in essence, the harassment she was experiencing at the hands of the state.

There have been so many cases that we have had to fight. Many hon. Members from across the House will have had similar cases. This is no way to treat hard-working and caring family members who, through their caring responsibilities, have saved the state billions of pounds. We should be supporting them, especially through bereavement, rather than punishing them. What can we do? In so many cases, it is too late for those who have experienced such treatment. People have been evicted from their homes and subjected to needless concern,
worry and stress. That has affected their mental health and wellbeing. In other cases, the effect has been even more severe.

Being treated this way by the national Government and by local government, through legislation, is wrong. Surely, we can do better in the future. Surely, we can reach cross-party agreement to look at this issue and look at the number of cases around the country. It is very hard for us to get the aggregate statistics on the impact on our constituents across the country, and this is a major problem. I strongly urge all local administrators to be made to adopt a humane, compassionate policy for those facing such difficulties. The Government should instruct them to stop sending eviction notices to our constituents when they have been bereaved. There should be a significant length of time before matters such as remaining in the properties they are resident in are considered, even if they are larger properties, so that they have an appropriate time in which to grieve and recover.

I am extremely grateful to Ministers and hon. Members from across the House for attending this debate, given that we are in the midst of an election campaign. I appreciate that this issue may well get drowned out in the election campaign because there are so many other big issues such as Brexit, the NHS and other public services that we will want to talk about. However, I hope that when the next team of Ministers returns to the House, we can all agree that we need action. I therefore ask the Minister to address the following points.

Does the Minister agree that passing a tenancy to an appropriate person who might be a relative—a child or a carer—can be an appropriate way to maintain stability and ensure that the parent receives the right support and that the child, who is often an adult, is not made homeless and punished for dutifully providing care to a family member? What assessment has she made of the workings of the Localism Act with regard to tenancy succession for those family members who have been carers for many years? How many cases end up in court? What is the financial and personal cost, in terms of health and wellbeing, to residents? Does she not agree that we need national guidance to provide clarity on how local agencies and authorities should treat people in such circumstances and that local authorities must not use eviction notices or bailiffs to threaten our constituents with eviction when they are suffering and grieving? That is utterly unacceptable. There is a wider point about the use of bailiffs by local authorities that this Government need to act on, because in such circumstances we can see how much damage is done. What steps will she take to ensure that there are common standards and that public servants take appropriate, sensitive actions in these times of need? Finally, will she commit to a timetable to deliver change?

In conclusion, to lose a parent or a relative is a terrible blow. The aftermath requires a suitable period of grieving and healing, and the amount of time required will vary as between different people. Those of us who have grieved for loved ones will know that we cannot put a fixed timetable on grief and recovery from it. Just because I am talking about people who are not wealthy, who do not have the means to own their own properties and do not have the resources but who have cared for a loved one does not mean that their suffering should be treated in this way—that they should not be treated compassionately for what they are doing, not only for their families, but as a public service. They have shown a duty of care and love to their family members and loved ones as their lives have come to an end, providing them with the dignity that they rightly should have, and we should make sure that such people are also treated in a dignified, caring way.

Mr Speaker: I thank the hon. Lady for her speech, including the very kind remarks that she made at the start.

I referenced a constituent and a former constituent earlier, whom I am absolutely thrilled to see in the Gallery. As we approach the end of the day and just before I call the Minister, whom I regard as a personal friend, I want to reference three other people in Gallery, because I regard their presence as being of great significance. First of all, Stephen Benn is in this place more often that he is out of it, and he has forged a magnificent link between the science community and Parliament. As a result of his prodigious efforts, boundless energy, personal charm and obvious commitment, those links are stronger now—I say this almost as much for the benefit of members of the public as I do for Members of the House—than they have been in the past. That is an enormous tribute to you, Stephen. Of course, you know that our bond is also strengthened by the fact that I came to know you through your late father, Tony, who was, without question, one of the great parliamentarians of the 20th century. I came to know Tony well and benefited from his counsel and support. I think of him pretty much every day and often regale audiences with anecdotes flowing from my friendship with and benefit gained from him.

I also want to mention Tim Hames, who has worked as an adviser to me for the last decade and who is as near to being a polymath as I know. He is one of these people who is incredibly accomplished at a very large number of different things—at writing and speaking, as an academic, as a journalist and as somebody who ran the British Private Equity and Venture Capital Association very successfully for a very long period—but who, in particular, has been a wonderful counsellor to me, of which I am enormously appreciative, as I think he knows. Tim, it is great to see you, and to see you accompanied by your wife Julia, and to have you in the Gallery as we approach the end of the day—my last day in the Chair—has a very special significance for me.

5.18 pm

The Minister for Housing (Ms Esther McVey): It is indeed an honour to be answering this debate—the very last debate that you will chair, Mr Speaker. In that regard, it is quite an occasion. Many of us will only know you as the Speaker. You have a reputation for being a thorn in the side of Ministers, but as a Minister I appreciate that your job is to help to ensure that Back Benchers hold Ministers to account, and you have done that better than anyone else. That is your job and your purpose for being here.

Many people have also mentioned how you have been a modernising Speaker, that you have ensured that Back Benchers have had more say and, in doing that, that the public have had a greater say in this House, as a centre of democracy; the people are being heard.
I wish you well as you go forth. There is a chapter closing here, but I do not want to dwell on that. I want to look forward to a chapter that will be opening, for you and your family. I am sure we have not heard the last of your dulcet tones. You have accrued an almost—no, not almost—an encyclopaedic knowledge of what goes on in this House, of its processes and procedures, and I hope you take that forth into another job that allows you to speak about what happens in Parliament. I hope you remain a good friend of this House too.

I want to also pay tribute to Rose—I will call her by her first name because most of us class her as a friend and call her by her first name. She has touched the hearts of many, as we have heard here today, and has been there for many during this turbulent time when people have turned to her in their time of need. She has celebrated with us and spent sad times with us. She has not left the House entirely: she is coming back next September, when I shall be, late in life, getting married for the first time.

I turn back to this important debate. I commend the hon. Member for Bethnal Green and Bow (Rushanara Ali) for securing it and bringing this matter to the Government’s attention. The Government recognise the important role that affordable housing in general, and social rented housing in particular, plays in supporting people and communities. That is why the Government are committed to increasing the supply of affordable housing and have made £9 billion available through the affordable homes programme, to March 2020, to deliver 250,000 new affordable homes of a wide range of tenure, including homes for social rent. It is also why we are determined to ensure that social housing is safe and decent and that those who live in social homes are treated with dignity and respect. The hon. Lady raised very relevant issues about those who have been bereaved and could be going through a period of grief.

The hon. Lady talked about succession and social housing. Social housing confers many benefits, including security of tenure and below-market rents. For local authority tenants, it also confers the statutory right to buy. It is incumbent, therefore, on local authorities and housing associations to manage their housing to benefit the community, particularly those in greatest need; they need that housing. It is important, therefore, that the succession rules strike a balance between the needs of those members of the deceased tenant’s family who consider the property to be their home, the interests of the local authority and the housing association in making best use of their housing, and the interests of those on the housing waiting list who are also in need.

There will always be sensitive and difficult cases that cannot always be foreseen or captured by the statutory provision, which is why there is an addition to that provision: the social landlord can exercise discretion to take into account individual circumstances such as those the hon. Lady raised, and that is what they should be doing. Provided it is in line with their own allocation policies and the Regulator of Social Housing’s tenancy standards, there is nothing to stop a social landlord granting the surviving family member a new tenancy in the same property, or they may be able to offer a tenancy for a different property, should that be more appropriate. Indeed, it is partly because the previous succession rules were considered too inflexible and not sufficient to allow for a household’s individual circumstances to be taken into account that the Government introduced changes under the Localism Act 2011.

Those changes apply to social tenancies granted from 1 April 2012. They mean that social landlords are no longer limited by law to providing only one succession to a spouse or a partner, or, in the case of local authorities, to a resident family member. Instead, social landlords have, since April 2012, been able to give to new tenants more extensive succession rights in tenancy agreements, in addition to the statutory one succession to a spouse or partner. That important flexibility means that, for example, carers or adult children who have lived in a property for many years can be provided with the assurance of a right to succeed to the tenancy, regardless of whether a previous succession has already taken place.

Striking the right balance between competing interests is never easy.

Rushanara Ali: I would be grateful if the Minister addressed the point about discretion. In some cases, discretion is being applied positively, humanely and compassionately, but, because of the pressures that local authorities face, in others they are being very hard line, which is the subject of the debate. Is she prepared to write to local authorities, giving them clear instructions on such situations, so that we avoid causing further harm to people’s lives?

Ms McVey: The hon. Lady raises a good point. As she rightly says, some authorities are doing this very well, but perhaps, in her circumstance, that has not necessarily happened. I will indeed work with her to write that letter, or to ensure that this happens and that this discretion is used when it should be.

On affordable house building, we want to ensure that everyone has a place that they can call home. In our 2017 housing White Paper, we pledged to address overall housing supply, and in the autumn Budget 2017 we set out our ambition to deliver 300,000 homes per year, on average, by the mid-2020s. Affordable housing, including affordable homes for rent, plays a vital role in reaching this target. Since 2010, we have delivered over 430,000 new affordable homes, including over 308,000 affordable homes for rent. We continue to support housing associations and councils with grant funding for the construction of new affordable homes. We have made over £9 billion available.

A mix of different tenures is vital to meet the needs of a wide range of people and to allow housing associations and local councils to build the right homes in the right places. That is why we have reintroduced social rent as part of our expanded programme. Social rent will meet the needs of struggling families and those most at risk of homelessness in areas of the country where affordability is most pressured. That would be in the hon. Lady’s constituency.

We have also set a long-term rent deal, announcing that increases to social housing rents will be limited to the consumer prices index plus 1% for five years from 2020. Through all those measures, we are creating an investment environment that supports councils and housing
Housing associations build the majority of this new affordable housing. Going forward, we want to see housing associations continue to maximise their contributions to housing supply. That is why we have been listening and working to create a stable investment environment to support the delivery of more affordable homes across the country. We have introduced strategic partnerships to offer housing associations greater flexibility, ensuring funding can be allocated where it is needed across multiple projects while still meeting overall delivery targets. That funding certainly also makes it more viable for developing housing associations to invest in more ambitious projects with greater delivery flexibilities and funding guaranteed over a longer period.

We have gone further, providing the sector with longer-term certainty of funding. Last September, the Government also announced £2 billion of long-term funding, which will boost affordable housing for associations. This unprecedented approach will deliver more affordable homes and stimulate the sector’s wider building ambitions. Strategic partnerships and our 10-year funding commitment mark the first time any Government have offered housing associations such long-term funding certainty.

That is what we need to do to ensure that we can always have that human interaction with tenants in houses when a bereavement happens. We have already opened up £1 billion of this funding through Homes England and we are working closely with the Greater London Authority to open bidding for London. I will close there and again thank the hon. Lady for bringing this debate to the House.

*Question put and agreed to.*

5.30 pm

*House adjourned.*
House of Commons

Monday 4 November 2019

The House met at half-past Two o’clock

Election of Speaker

The right hon. and learned Kenneth Clarke, the Member for Rushcliffe, took the Chair (Standing Order No. 1(1)).

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): I have to acquaint the House that Her Majesty, having been informed of the resignation of the right hon. John Bercow, lately Speaker of this House, gives leave to the House to proceed forthwith to the election of a new Speaker.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (in the Chair): The House will now proceed to the election of a new Speaker in accordance with the provisions of Standing Order No. 1B. In a moment, I will call the candidates to address the House in the order in which I drew their names by lot this morning. The order of speaking was published this morning and has, I think, been visible on the Annunciator to all Members, but it is purely random. I have asked each candidate to speak for no more than five minutes. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”] The candidates will no doubt be further advised by that response. When all candidates have addressed the House, we will proceed to the first ballot.

2.31 pm

Dame Rosie Winterton (Doncaster Central) (Lab): I am sure that all the other candidates in the election today will agree with me, Mr Clarke, when I say that none of us can match the experience that you have in this place, or the esteem in which you are held. You are leaving us after half a century of service, and we thank you for that service, but others are leaving in part because of what our politics has become. As the House is the crucible of our politics, that should concern us all, which is why the role of Speaker matters so much.

I am putting myself forward after 22 years of diverse experience as a Back Bencher, a Minister, a shadow Leader of the House, a Chief Whip and a Deputy Speaker. Restoring public confidence in Parliament is all our responsibility, but the Speaker sets the tone. My view is that the Speaker’s job is not to dominate proceedings or speak for Parliament but to facilitate debate and allow Parliament to speak for itself, with all its different voices and in all its diverse voices.

During my time as Opposition Chief Whip, I worked with the majority and minority parties to build consensus where we could, and I made sure that we did not fall out when we could not agree. As Deputy Speaker, I have been struck by the fact that in so many of our debates there is consensus, with members of different parties working together to find common ground. Of course, there will always be times when the House is rumbustious; that is fine. What the public do not like is ill temper and intolerance. The turbulent time in our politics has put this institution, and all of us, under great strain. [Interruption.] [Laughter.] The phone ringing was not a set-up, I promise you.

The Executive must be allowed to carry out their mandate when it is given by the people, but Members of Parliament must also be allowed to scrutinise legislation and hold the Government to account. The Speaker has a crucial role in getting that balance right. If there is a logjam, the Speaker should help Parliament to find a way through—to bring parties together to solve the problem. In all the posts I have held, I have been a conciliator; as Speaker, I would douse the flames, not pour petrol on them—a stabilising, unifying Speaker, and a Speaker from the north so that the public see that Parliament is about the whole country, not just London. And the last woman from the north did a pretty good job.

To gain respect from the public, we must show each other respect. The next Speaker must lead by the example she sets, changing the tone and lowering the temperature when the House gets overheated. As Deputy Speaker, I have tried to do that; I hope Members feel I have been impartial, not impatient.

As Deputy Speaker, I have seen tempers rise if there is too much disruption of business. Urgent questions are an important innovation of our last Speaker, but I have seen Members become frustrated, having worked hard on a speech only to end up being squeezed by a three-minute time limit. Urgent business must be debated when it is urgent, but UQs and statements should not take hours, neither should PMQs—[HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear.”] If a Member does not get called, they should get priority next time, and newer Members should not always have to wait until last to be called. All our constituencies have the same right to be heard.

Parliament should be a workplace free from bullying and harassment. The Commission must be at the centre of changing the culture of Parliament. It should be accessible to Members and staff and the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority should stop getting in the way of Members doing their jobs. MPs who are parents or have caring responsibilities need proper support; we must become a modern, family-friendly workplace.

My dad was a headteacher in Doncaster and I bump into people he taught all the time. He is remembered not as a fierce disciplinarian, but as someone who was fair, encouraging and trusted—not a bad legacy. My ambition as Speaker would be to follow his example: not seek the limelight, but build trust.

2.37 pm

Chris Bryant (Rhondda) (Lab): Politics can be cruel. A young lad came up to me in Tonypandy the other day. He could not quite place who I was, but he knew he had seen me somewhere, maybe on telly. I said, “Well, maybe it’s because I am the MP for the Rhondda,” and he said, “No, that’s Chris Bryant—and he’s much younger than you.” For the record, I am 57, older than John Bercow.

Politics has, however, felt especially cruel in the past few years. Many of us feel battered and bruised, and many of the public feel that Parliament has been a bit of a bearpit, but we speak as we find and my personal experience from earlier this year, when I was wandering around looking like I was auditioning for the part of the monster in “Frankenstein”, was that there are untold, countless moments of personal, enormous generosity in this House, and most of the country would be enormously proud of the way we do our business if only they knew.
[Chris Bryant]

The truth is that politics is an honourable profession. Every single one of us in this House entered politics because we wanted to change the world for the better, and often the individual campaigns that we run touch millions of lives: just think of the campaign to get Brineura for children with Batten disease; think of the work that has been done on getting an inquiry on contaminated blood, or for that matter on children's funerals or on people trafficking. There are so many different campaigns, including the one I dedicated myself to on acquired brain injury and melanoma. That is why it is so important that we revitalise and stand up for parliamentary democracy and return to the rulebook—stitch it back together.

I am standing because I love Parliament—I believe in parliamentary democracy and I want to do things properly. That means being a Speaker who has absolutely no favourites, who believes in standing by the rules, who is completely impartial, and who knows “Erskine May” inside out and back to front—I have it lying by my bedside—[Laughter.] All right! It means being a Speaker who is an umpire, not a player.

This is one of the most demanding jobs in British politics. For centuries it was said that it could be done only by a top-rate lawyer, and that is because the decisions that are made by the Speaker are of constitutional significance. You have to be quick on your feet. You have to be able to defend the decision and explain it in plain English.

There are things I want to do. I want to get Prime Minister’s questions back to 30 minutes. I want to publish a speakers list for debates so that you know today you will get called first tomorrow. I want to call Minister’s questions back to 30 minutes. I want to have achieved in recent years. Be of good heart, be of good hope, and once again this place can be the forum of great, determined, and considered judgments. I want to ensure that every single MP, their families and, importantly, their staff are safe in their constituency offices and in their homes. I want to make the timing of the parliamentary day more predictable, I want to increase the human resources department, and I want to submerge his or her character in the job. The Speaker should be a dignified and quiet voice, and I believe that all the candidates standing today can achieve that.

I believe that we in this Parliament should not be contemptuous of what we have achieved over the past three years. Insults have been hurled at us, but Chris mentioned our famous forebear and how he, as our Speaker, made it clear that he was only the servant of the House. We who sit in this House should be proud of what we have achieved over the past three years as the cockpit of the political nation, where every point of view can be heard, debated and thrashed out. I believe that we can make this place even better. It is no accident that the great speeches in history in this place were precisely that: speeches. They were not interminable self-regarding interventions or points of order or statements that go on forever. We should recreate the great debates in this place and allow adequate time and be fair to everybody, so that everybody gets a fair crack of the whip, literally, to put their point of view.

We can go from strength to strength, but this place is not just about words—important as they are—or votes; it is also about a sense of history and a sense of place. I believe that we in this Parliament should not be contemptuous of what we have achieved over the past three years. Insults have been hurled at us, but Chris mentioned our famous forebear and how he, as our Speaker, made it clear that he was only the servant of the House. We who sit in this House should be proud of what we have achieved over the past three years as the cockpit of the political nation, where every point of view can be heard, debated and thrashed out. I believe that we can make this place even better. It is no accident that the great speeches in history in this place were precisely that: speeches. They were not interminable self-regarding interventions or points of order or statements that go on forever. We should recreate the great debates in this place and allow adequate time and be fair to everybody, so that everybody gets a fair crack of the whip, literally, to put their point of view.

That is enough of me. I just want to take a moment to talk about what I believe the Speaker should be. I am with Chris and Rosie on this. I think the Speaker should be a dignified and quiet voice, and I believe that all the candidates standing today can achieve that.

I believe that we in this Parliament should not be contemptuous of what we have achieved over the past three years. Insults have been hurled at us, but Chris mentioned our famous forebear and how he, as our Speaker, made it clear that he was only the servant of the House. We who sit in this House should be proud of what we have achieved over the past three years as the cockpit of the political nation, where every point of view can be heard, debated and thrashed out. I believe that we can make this place even better. It is no accident that the great speeches in history in this place were precisely that: speeches. They were not interminable self-regarding interventions or points of order or statements that go on forever. We should recreate the great debates in this place and allow adequate time and be fair to everybody, so that everybody gets a fair crack of the whip, literally, to put their point of view.

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good cheer, be sincere to your beliefs and above all, dear friends, hold the Executive to account whoever they are, because that is what this place is all about.

2.47 pm

Dame Eleanor Laing (Epping Forest) (Ind): When I was growing up in the small village of Elderslie in the west of Scotland, who would have thought that little Eleanor from across the road would one day end up standing to be the Speaker of the House of Commons? I certainly did not. It is a great testament to our country and to our democracy that this moment is even possible.

I begin, Mr Clarke, by paying tribute to you on this your last day in the House after nearly 50 years. Thank you for your service. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear.”] I imagine that you are finding that the House looks rather different from where you are now sitting compared with your usual seat up here. Well, I know how you feel.

Standing where I am today, for the first time in six years, reminds me of how easy it is to see ourselves as “us and them”, whereas for the last six years, sitting there in the Chair, it has seemed to me just to be us—us, the House—because that is how it should be from the Chair. It is the role of the Speaker not to create division or rancour in this House, but to seek consensus and to remind us of the things that unite us all: our rules, our procedures, and our precious conventions. As Rosie and Chris rightly said, and despite what our detractors say, the House of Commons is full of good people—

Vicky Ford (Chelmsford) (Con): “Hear, hear!”

Dame Eleanor Laing: “Hear, hear!”—[Laughter.] In all corners of this place there are good people who genuinely want to make the world a better place. Of course we all have different ideas about how we would do that, but even if we sometimes fall short, our intentions are, in a word, honourable.

I am very sad that so many hon. Members, whom I see as I look around the Chamber, have decided to leave the House tomorrow. It is time someone had the courage to defend Members of Parliament, not just inside this House but outside it as well. Defending Members of Parliament is what I will do if the House makes me Speaker, because failing to stand up for the honourable men and women who come to this place to do their public duty not only harms the individual MP but weakens Parliament in the eyes of the nation.

We all know that, beyond the Westminster bubble, there is real anxiety about the health of our democratic system. We need to rebuild confidence and trust in our politics, and it must begin with this election today. There are times for continuity and there are times for change. This is a time for change, and I want to be that change.

This is the 21st century, for goodness’ sake. We need to escape the overbearing and hierarchical structures that have made it all too easy for a culture of bullying to take root. As Deputy Speaker, I hope I have always discharged my duties with consistency, with courtesy and with kindness.

Despite being a lawyer, for which you will have to forgive me, I always try to remember that we are dealing not merely with rules and laws here; we are also dealing with the welfare of people. That is why the most urgent change I want to see is making the Speaker more accountable than at any time in our history. While I am at it, may I just say that it is not the role of the Speaker to say any more than needs to be said nor to take up time in this Chamber, especially when that robs Back Benchers of their precious speaking time? [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear!”] Well, I am glad someone agrees with allocated minutes.

The Speaker is not the ruler of the House of Commons but its servant. It is in that spirit that I ask the House to entrust to me this most historic and special role.

2.52 pm

Meg Hillier (Hackney South and Shoreditch) (Lab/Co-op): I think we all know there is a lack of trust in Parliament and politics right now, with everything from the behaviour in the Chamber to the allegations of bullying and sexual assault—we have had three such allegations since this race for the speakership began just six weeks ago—and the general state of politics out there in the nation. So the next Speaker has a key role in setting the tone, yes, in the Chamber but also with colleagues in this place who support us in our work and in the country.

I would be a Speaker who speaks less, but when I speak it will be with the clear intent of standing up for MPs. The House has heard from other candidates today and at the hustings that we are in broad agreement on how to manage the Chamber. We want to be champions—I certainly would be—of better conduct. I would be an impartial Speaker, a director rather than an actor. We also want better time keeping. Urgent questions and statements are going on too long, and that greater discipline would give greater certainty on timings so we can plan the rest of our lives. We need an end to short time limits.

I have a track record of fairness and of delivering what I promise. I have chaired the Public Accounts Committee for the last four and a half years, and I have introduced a new way of working on the Select Committee corridor. As a Minister, I dealt fairly with all MPs, whatever their party, because, let us not forget, we are all here only because our constituents elect us. We respect each other, we respect our constituents—it is as simple as that. Some time ago, I was mayor of a hung council in London, where I had the casting vote, while also being the first citizen, so I had to handle some pretty difficult situations in a fraught council chamber. But I am not a grandstanding politician. I would speak little, and, as many of you know, I am incredibly discreet when you come to see me about matters in your constituency. I would not seek self-publicity, but would speak up only for MPs, and for Parliament and our democracy.

We need better support for MPs. There is too little personal development and careers advice, and that shows up starkly when so many Members are leaving with short notice and we have Members losing seats. Of course, on restoration and renewal, it was my amendment that moved us forward, so we will be leaving the building. We need to tackle that, and I am already working up plans on how we monitor the cost—of course that is important—but this is also an opportunity to rekindle how we do things and how we change the culture of this place. As Speaker, I would have your back—on unfair publicity, on expenses. More than that, I would work to
educate the public about what great work MPs do in this place, and I would step up the approach to personal security and online bullying, which is leading to too many colleagues leaving this place because it is intolerable.

However, the main thrust of why I am standing is about the bullying and harassment that is still too rife in this building. It is just over a year since Dame Laura Cox reported and, yes, we need an independent process in place, but we need more than that. Gemma White’s report earlier this year highlighted problems in our own offices. There is a good list of MPs to work for and a bad list of MPs to work for—staff know this, we know this. It may be an uncomfortable message. It may not be a vote-winner today, but we should not be complacent even if we are on that good list. We should not rest while young staff in this building are fearful and fearful and afraid to raise concerns about how they have been treated. We need better HR, and supported and trained senior office managers; and we need to tackle this now. It has to stop; it is going to be the next expenses scandal, colleagues, if we do not tackle this. We have to lead by example. We have to put our own house in order and call out bad behaviour where necessary—but we need to prevent it before it gets to that point. We do that externally and we need to do that here. I would be utterly committed to this. I have worked up plans, and I have talked to staff and unions about how to deliver on this. We need to work with staff. We cannot talk about them without them. We need a culture shift. We have to lead by example. Don’t let this moment pass.

Sir Lindsay Hoyle (Chorley) (Lab): I will say, as has everybody else, that you will be missed in this House, Mr Clarke, but I do know one thing: I don’t think it will be the end of your voice—I think your voice will continue to give us advice for a lot longer in time.

A great hero of mine is here today: Baroness Boothroyd. She was the white rose; she was the voice of the north, and what the white rose brought, hopefully the red rose will follow.

Of course, it is an absolute privilege to speak again from these Back Benches. These are the Back Benches that matter. These are the Back Benches that hold the Executive to account, and there has been no better time than the 13 years I spent here, sometimes with the Labour Government and shortly afterwards with a different Government. But this is about making sure, whoever is in power, that those on these Benches have the right to question and hold to account. That is what matters. Of course, this is about having an accountable Speaker to back to that up: it is not just about the Back Benches; it is about a Speaker who endorses and supports the Back Benches. That is what I hope I have always shown during my nine years as Deputy Speaker. I have tried to ensure that not one part of this House has not been called to speak, and whatever the size of a party I have encouraged Members to make sure that their voice is heard, and I want to continue to do that.

This is not a club for people who have been here for 35 years—do not take that the wrong way, Mr Clarke. The fact is that when I look at people who have been in this House for 35 years, I think, “I’ve heard that speech before and will do again many more times.” That speech is important, but the person who walked through the Chamber door yesterday is just as important to their constituents. Their voice must be heard as well and they ought not to be a pecking order. It is about equality. We are all equal in this House when we come to speak. That is the point that we must retain, and I promise that that is what I will do.

A Speaker has to be trusted, and I hope that I have built up that trust. It is about having a proven track record, and I hope the House will agree that I have that track record. People say, “Well, I’ll do this in such an amount of time for Prime Minister’s questions,” or that they will do something else, but I have done it. I have been there and yes, we did reduce the time, because it is not about me; it is about the people on these Benches. That is why we can do it in good time and that is what I want to continue to do. When I say, “I have done it”—I have done Prime Minister’s questions, I do the Budget and I have done many other things in this House—it has all been done with fairness, which is what matters to us all.

Other Members have touched on reform. We need to continue to reform. We need to support the people in security. When I took over responsibility for security, there were no measures for MPs. There was so little for us—we did not matter. I hope people will recognise what I have done: I have stood up and made sure that we can feel safe. That job has started, but it has not finished; I want the House to give me the chance to finish it as Speaker. I promise that I will continue to fight to make sure that we are safe, our families are safe, our staff are safe and the House is safe. That is what matters.

It is about delivering for all and I assure the House that is what I will do. It is about experience and drive. I will make sure that reform continues for the best of all. I believe that the Chamber is underused; we ought to look seriously at how much more we can get out of it. We can come forward with great ideas.

My pledge to the House and its Members is that I will be here for you. I will make sure that a Deputy Speaker can become Speaker and will not let you down. I will be accountable.

Ms Harriet Harman (Camberwell and Peckham) (Lab): These are difficult, even dangerous times for our parliamentary democracy. The country is divided and the House is divided. The public view of this House is at an all-time low. Too often, this Chamber descends into shouting and abuse. Relations between this House and the Government are broken. Many of us work under a hail of threats of violence—against us, our families and our staff. So Members’ choice of the next Speaker is really important.

I know that the House wants a Speaker who will be, and who will be seen to be, scrupulously impartial and fair to every MP from every party. When I was Leader of the House, I was exactly that. But it is not just about being fair; it is about perception. We cannot go on with huge decisions being made by one person, behind closed doors. I would reform the Speaker’s powers to make them transparent and accountable to this House, and I would be fearless in standing up for the rights of the House.
I know that the House wants a Speaker who understands what it is to be a Government Back Bencher and an Opposition Back Bencher, and a Government Minister and a shadow Minister, and I have been all those things. My guiding principle would be that all constituencies are equal and, because of that, all Members are equal and owed equal respect. So as Speaker, I would regard it as my responsibility to help you wherever you are in the House, and however long you have been here, to be the best that you can be.

One thing that I have not been is a member of one of our minority parties. That is why, if I were Speaker, I would want a fourth deputy in my team, drawn from the members of the minority parties, so I would have that perspective right at my side.

I know you want a Speaker who will help Parliament change with the times. I have fought for and won reform: making our Select Committees powerful and independent by giving us the right to elect the Chairs rather than their being appointed by the Whips—I did that when I was Leader of the House; setting up the Backbench Business Committee so that we can choose the subject of debates—I did that, too, as Leader of the House; changing the voting system for election of Speaker to make it by secret ballot—I hope that that was a good idea; and just this year, by working with Members across parties, getting the right for new mothers and fathers to vote by proxy when your baby is born.

I am running for Speaker in these difficult times because I have unparalleled experience and an unparalleled record of reform of this House, but there is one other reason I want your vote. Parliament has changed. It is nothing like the old boys' network it was when I first came in—when I was one of only 3% women Members among 97% men. Now, there are 211 women in every party in the House, and men here who speak up for women's rights, too, but, in 600 years, there has only ever been one woman Speaker. I do not actually agree with making reference to the Gallery, but I will break with precedent here and pay tribute to Betty Boothroyd. So, in 600 years, there has only ever been one woman. There have been 156 men. This is my question to the House today: can we show the country that we have changed with the times. I have fought for and won should vote in the Aye Lobby. Members with surnames beginning with the letters L to Z should vote in the No Lobby. Please enter the Lobbies by the main entrances as the side doors will be locked. When you enter the Lobbies, please give your name to the Clerk at the appropriate desk for the letter of your surname. As usual, surnames have been divided into three streams in each Lobby. When you pass the desk, you will be given a ballot paper. When you have completed it, please place it in one of the ballot boxes at the exit of the Lobby. That should be familiar. [Laughter] I remind Members that they should vote only for one candidate. It is not a transferrable vote; it is an exclusive vote. The ballot will remain open for 20 minutes. I hope to announce the result of each ballot around 45 minutes after the closure of the ballot. [Interruption] That, I think, is for counting and the printing of new ballot papers. The House will be alerted by the Annunciator before it is to resume, and Division bells will also be rung.

I declare the ballot open.

3.10 pm
Sitting suspended.

4.15 pm
On resuming—

Mr Kenneth Clarke (in the Chair): This is the result of the first ballot. The total number of ballots cast was 562. The number of votes cast for each candidate, in alphabetical order, was as follows:

Chris Bryant, 98;  
Ms Harriet Harman, 72;  
Meg Hillier, 10;  
Sir Lindsay Hoyle, 211;  
Dame Eleanor Laing, 113;  
Sir Edward Leigh, 12;  
Dame Rosie Winterton, 46.  

There were no spoiled ballots. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear!”] A remarkable achievement for this particular assembly.

No Member received more than 50% of the ballots cast, so we proceed to a further ballot. Meg Hillier received the fewest votes and Sir Edward Leigh also received fewer than 5% of the ballots cast, so under the rules they both leave the contest.

Before I confirm the list of candidates for the next ballot, I now invite any candidate who wishes to withdraw to inform me in the Chamber within the next 10 minutes, which means that I sit here for 10 minutes waiting for each of the candidates to carefully consider their position and then come to inform me if they wish to withdraw from the next ballot. I shall then make further announcements, and we will have to have new ballot papers printed before we actually get to the next round of voting. I will now suspend the House, and in 10 minutes’ time I will announce the candidates who are proposing to proceed to the second round of the ballot.

4.17 pm
Proceedings suspended.
Mr Kenneth Clarke (in the Chair): Order. No candidates have withdrawn, so the candidates for the next ballot are Chris Bryant, Ms Harriet Harman, Sir Lindsay Hoyle, Dame Eleanor Laing and Dame Rosie Winterton. The next ballot will be opened as soon as the ballot papers have been printed, checked and put in place, which is likely to be in about 20 minutes—[HON. MEMBERS: “Oh!”] This is an early stage of these proceedings at the present rate of progress. I will cause the bells to be rung as soon as the Lobbies are ready, and the ballot will then start. As before, Members will have 20 minutes in which to vote.

John Spellar (Warley) (Lab): On a point of order, Mr Clarke.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (in the Chair): May I suggest that the right hon. Gentleman come to the Table to try to explain what his point of order is?

John Spellar: I think colleagues know who has dropped out. It seems to me utterly absurd not to have just reprinted the ballot paper for people to put their cross. All this delay is quite unnecessary and bureaucratic.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (in the Chair): I am sure that we are both out of order, but, with great respect, although these arrangements do need revising in various other respects, with the arrangements that we have it was not possible to know who the candidates were for the next round until a proper opportunity had been given for any candidates who wished to withdraw. I am afraid that the delay is inevitable. I declare the House suspended until the next stage in the proceedings when we have the ballot papers.

Proceedings suspended.

4.43 pm

Mr Kenneth Clarke (in the Chair): Order. In a moment, I will declare open the ballot. The voting arrangements are identical to those for the last ballot, and as before, the ballot will remain open for 20 minutes. I hope to announce the result of the ballot around 45 minutes after the closure of the ballot. Before we resume, the House will again be alerted by the Annunciator and the Division bell will be rung. The Division bells will be rung as soon as the Lobbies are ready, and the ballot will then start. As before, Members will have 20 minutes to vote.

Proceedings suspended.

5.45 pm

On resuming—

Mr Kenneth Clarke (in the Chair): Order. This is the result of the second ballot. Five hundred and seventy five ballots were cast—[HON. MEMBERS: “Ooh!”] Late arrivals, I think. The number of votes cast for each candidate was as follows:

Chris Bryant, 120;
Ms Harriet Harman, 59;
Sir Lindsay Hoyle, 244;
Dame Eleanor Laing, 122;
Dame Rosie Winterton, 30.

There were no spoiled ballots. Yet again, no Member received more than 50% of the ballots cast, so we proceed to a further ballot. Dame Rosie Winterton received the fewest votes, so she retires. Before I confirm the list of candidates for the next ballot, I now invite any candidate who wishes to withdraw to inform me in the Chamber or the Clerk Assistant in the Reasons Room within the next 10 minutes.

5.46 pm

Proceedings suspended.

5.57 pm

Mr Kenneth Clarke (in the Chair): Order. Dame Rosie Winterton has been eliminated and Ms Harriet Harman has withdrawn her candidature. [ Interruption. ] I would have thought that that would be a popular gesture—not in personal terms but because it saves us a ballot. Otherwise, I am sure, there is widespread regret.

The candidates for the next ballot are Chris Bryant, Sir Lindsay Hoyle and Dame Eleanor Laing. I repeat, as I did before, that the next ballot will be opened as soon as the ballot papers have been printed, checked and put in place, which is likely to be in about 20 minutes. The Division bells will be rung as soon as the Lobbies are ready, and the ballot will then start. As before, Members will have 20 minutes to vote.

Proceedings suspended.

6.12 pm

Mr Kenneth Clarke (in the Chair): Order. In a moment, I will declare the ballot open. The voting arrangements are identical to those for the last ballot. As before, the ballot will be open for 20 minutes. I hope to announce the result about 45 minutes after the closure of the ballot. Before we resume, the House will again be alerted by the Annunciator and the Division bell will be rung. The ballot is now open.

Sitting suspended.

7.11 pm

On resuming—

Mr Kenneth Clarke (in the Chair): Order. This is the result of the third ballot. The number of ballots cast was 565. The number of votes cast for each candidate were as follows:

Chris Bryant, 169 votes;
Sir Lindsay Hoyle, 267 votes;
Dame Eleanor Laing, 127 votes.

Two ballot papers were spoiled.

Those Members with adequate mental arithmetic will know that no Member received more than 50% of the ballots cast. Dame Eleanor Laing received the fewest votes and therefore leaves the contest.

Again, before I confirm the candidates for the next ballot, I invite either candidate who wishes to withdraw to inform me in the Chamber or to inform the Clerk Assistant in the Reasons Room within the next 10 minutes.

Chris Bryant: On a point of order, Mr Clarke. It might save the House 10 minutes if I just said that I am not going to withdraw at this point.

Proceedings suspended.
Mr Kenneth Clarke (in the Chair): I think Mr Bryant has done the House a considerable courtesy. We now move to what, as far as I can see, is the final and decisive ballot, for which the candidates are Chris Bryant and Sir Lindsay Hoyle. Once more, the ballot will be opened as soon as the ballot papers have been printed, checked and put in place, which is likely to be in about 15 minutes. I will cause the bells to be rung as soon as the Lobbies are ready, and the ballot will then start. As before, Members will have 20 minutes to vote.

Proceedings suspended.

7.28 pm

Mr Kenneth Clarke (in the Chair): In a moment, I will declare the ballot open. The voting arrangements are of course identical to those for the last ballot. The ballot will be open for 20 minutes. As there are only two candidates, I hope to announce the result about 30 minutes after the closure of the ballot. The House will be alerted by the Annunciator before it is to resume, and the Division bell will be rung. The ballot—the final ballot—is now open.

Sitting suspended.

8.20 pm

On resuming—

Mr Kenneth Clarke (in the Chair): This is the result of the fourth and final ballot. Five hundred and forty ballots were cast—some other pressing engagements have taken people away. The number of votes cast for each candidate was as follows: Chris Bryant 213; Sir Lindsay Hoyle 325. Two ballots were spoilt. Sir Lindsay Hoyle has obviously secured more than 50% of the ballots cast.

Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 1B (10)).

That Sir Lindsay Hoyle do take the Chair of this House as Speaker.

Question agreed to.

Mr Kenneth Clarke (in the Chair): I invite Sir Lindsay Hoyle to take the Chair of the House. [Applause.]

Mr Kenneth Clarke left the Chair, and Sir Lindsay Hoyle was taken out of his place and conducted to the Chair by Jackie Doyle-Price, Mr Nigel Evans and Caroline Flint.

Mr Speaker-Elect (standing on the upper step): No clapping. [Laughter.]

Mr Clarke, thank you for the way you have chaired our proceedings. We have kept you longer than expected and I really appreciate it. You have been steadfast in the job you have done and it really is appreciated.

May I say thank you to all the candidates? Whoever was selected would have made a great Speaker. We thank those who withdrew—Sir Henry Bellingham and Mr Shashi Var—for the way they wanted to ensure that we did not have to stay for another two rounds.

As I have discussed, it is about the campaign and the challenges ahead for me and this Chamber. I stand by what I have said and stand firm. I hope that this House will be once again a great, respected House, not just in here but around the world. I hope that once again it is the envy of the world. We have to make sure that that tarnish is polished away and that the respect and tolerance that we expect from everyone who works here will be shown, and we will keep that in order.

I also want to say something to my family. [Applause.]

There is one difficult part that I want to get over. There is one person who is not here: my daughter Natalie. I wish she had been here. We all miss her, as a family, and none more so than her mum Miriam. I have to say that she was everything to all of us. She will always be missed but she will always be in our thoughts. [HON. MEMBERS: “Hear, hear!”]

I hope to show that the experience I have shown previously will continue. As I have promised, I will be neutral. I will be transparent. I think that this House can do more to ensure that that transparency continues, and nowhere more than in respect of the Commission. I have never served on the Commission—I have never even seen the minutes of the Commission—but I do believe there is a need for a little bit of transparency once again.

I have to say thank you to my family, but also to the staff from my office who are also with me tonight. They have been with me for a long time. In fact, Bev, who is up there and who will get all embarrassed, has been with me for 21 years. She left university and said, “I’m never going to get married. I’m never going to have children. I don’t want any of that in my life.” Guess what? She is married; she has children; and she is still with me. The same with Peter and Mike. They have done a fantastic job. They have been really good.

I want to thank everybody. It has been a long night. I do not want to keep you any longer, but I do stand by what I have said. This House will change, but it will change for the better. Thank you, everybody.

The Speaker-Elect sat down in the Chair and the Mace was placed upon the Table.

8.25 pm

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): Mr Speaker-Elect, I know that you will want to join me in thanking, first of all, the Father of the House for the way that he has conducted today’s proceedings. Where is he? [Interjection.]

There he is! I pay renewed tributes to my right hon. and learned Friend who outranks just about every Member not just in length of service, but in distinction. He has held six Cabinet posts, including two great offices of state. His Hush Puppies have been found propped up on the desk of ministerial offices in four separate decades. His continuing physical and intellectual robustness are a tribute to the benefits of a lifetime’s diet of beer, curry and Castella cigars, all of which I hope he will continue to enjoy in a long and happy retirement at Trent Bridge, or touring the famous jazz clubs in West Bridgford.

Mr Speaker-Elect, in congratulating you on your election, I observe that you have prevailed over an extremely strong field and that every other candidate earlier on spoke forcefully and well. I will not presume to identify exactly what characteristics other Members of this House saw in you when they elected you just now, but speaking for myself, after long and happy years of dealing with you, I think I know what it is. Let me say that, whenever any of us is preparing to speak in this Chamber, we all know that there is a moment between standing up and when the Speaker calls us when our heart is in our mouth and in that moment of anxiety about whether we are going to make a fool of ourselves and, indeed, at the moment when we sit down amid deafening silence, the kindliness of the Speaker is absolutely critical to our confidence and the way that we behave.
Mr Speaker-Elect, over the years, I have observed that you have many good qualities. I am sure that you will stick up for Back Benchers in the way that you have proposed, and I am sure you will adhere to a strict Newtonian concept of time in PMQs. I believe that you will also bring your signature kindness and reasonableness to our proceedings, thereby helping to bring us together as a Parliament and as a democracy. No matter how fiercely we may disagree, we know that every Member comes to this place with the best of motives, determined to serve the oldest parliamentary democracy in the world and to achieve our goals by the peaceable arts of reason and debate invigilated by an impartial Speaker, which was, and remains, one of our greatest gifts to the world. Thank you, Mr Speaker-Elect, and congratulations.

Mr Speaker-Elect: The only people I forgot to thank were all the staff of this House and Joanna Dodd for the way that she ran this election campaign. I thank everybody in this House.

8.29 pm

Jeremy Corbyn (Islington North) (Lab): Mr Speaker-Elect, may I join others in offering my congratulations to you on winning the election, and thank the Father of the House for conducting the election in the way in which he did? Congratulations and commiserations to the other candidates who did not succeed in getting elected, but who nevertheless made sure that we had a good campaign and serious debate all across the House; that was very important.

We are well aware, Mr Speaker-Elect, of your abilities at chairing the House because we have been through Finance Bills and Budgets in which you are robust in ensuring that people stick to the point and the subject of the debate, as some comrades on my side of the House and Members on the Government side sometimes deviate from the subject in hand—unprecedented, I know, but there we are.

In your position, Mr Speaker-Elect, you are going to need eyes in the back of your head. It is a difficult job; you do not know what is coming at you next. I realise that you have actually been in training in this regard, because I have been looking at a photograph of you at the weekend apparently watching the rugby world cup final while at the same time not watching the television. The only conclusion that I can draw from this is that you literally do have eyes in the back of your head, because you were able to make some very wise comments about the progress of the match that you were apparently not watching at the same time. These qualities alone equip you to be an absolutely brilliant Chair of this House.

Mr Speaker-Elect, as you have said and many know, the job of Speaker is not just a ceremonial one. It is about the rights of Back Benchers to be able to speak up and the power of Parliament to hold the Government to account. The whole principle and point of a parliamentary democracy is that we have a strong Parliament that can hold the Executive to account, and I know that you will stand up for that principle because that is what you believe in. It is absolutely at the heart of our political system.

Mr Speaker-Elect, you take the wellbeing of everybody who works in this building, and of Members, very seriously. This is a fevered and imaginative place that we all work in. People are put under enormous stress, and both staff and Members of this House sometimes find themselves in a lonely and desperate place because of that. I know that you take your responsibilities in that area very seriously and that you want to make this an even more compassionate and humane place in which to work.

Mr Speaker-Elect, thank you for your work and for taking this job on, but also for assuring us that you will always stand up for the democratic values that this House represents and the power of an elected Parliament to express its views and hold the Executive to account, because that is the whole principle behind our parliamentary democracy.

Mr Speaker-Elect: Just for the record, the score had come through and England could not win; that is why I wasn’t looking at the television. [Laughter.]

8.32 pm

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): Congratulations, Mr Speaker-Elect. Some Members on the Scottish National party Benches thought that we might salute you by singing the “Ode to Joy”, but we got into a little bit of trouble the last time we tried that when you were in the Chair. I am sure that the Father of the House would not have minded though, and we congratulate him on chairing today’s proceedings.

All the candidates said that they would protect and respect the rights of the third party and the smaller parties in this House, and we appreciate and look forward to that. Not quite as many SNP Members are here as there might have been in other circumstances, but we look forward to coming back in even greater numbers after 12 December to congratulate you more fully, Mr Speaker-Elect. Your predecessor presided over historic times and I think there are historic times yet to come. Perhaps you will be presiding over independence for Scotland. We look forward to the years to come and wish you every success.

8.33 pm

Jo Swinson (East Dunbartonshire) (LD): I thank the Father of the House for the way in which he conducted this election. Congratulations from the Liberal Democrat Benches on your new role, Mr Speaker-Elect. You have been clear that you want to be a strong champion for Back Benchers in this place, and have always conducted yourself with good humour and taken great care of Members in this place. The focus that you placed on the importance of health and wellbeing—particularly mental health—in your election campaign is very welcome indeed for those who work here, including Members and others in different roles.

Mr Speaker-Elect, you take the Chair at a time of great challenge for our democracy. The issues of security that you have championed as Deputy Speaker are more important than ever, with increasing threats. The focus on stamping out the unacceptable culture of bullying and harassment is hugely important. I hope you will also continue the work of modernisation of this place that we have seen in the past decade. I welcome your pledge on outreach to make sure that we reach out to
I wish you well in your new role. It is not one that will necessarily be a popularity contest where you will find yourself welcomed by everybody, but I may at least hope that you will frustrate the various parts of this House equally.

Mr Speaker-Elect: I call the right hon. Nigel Dodds.

8.34 pm

Nigel Dodds (Belfast North) (DUP): Thank you, Mr Speaker-Elect. It gives me great pleasure to be able to call you that and to wish you well. I want to thank the Father of the House for the way that he conducted the election, and the staff of the House as well. You have already demonstrated in your role in the Chair on certain occasions how you intend to conduct yourself, and I think that will be welcome across the House. I think that the House is looking for a breath of fresh air and a way forward that is broadly based, and your vote tonight reflects a broad consensus across the House. I wish you extremely well for the future, and your family. Of course, with all the challenges that you have been through in recent times, you have come through that all the stronger, and much admired. You have been a good friend, not just when you were seeking votes but long before that. Thank you.

The Prime Minister: I have to signify to the House the pleasure of Her Majesty that the House should present their Speaker this day at 9.35 pm in the House of Peers for Her Majesty’s Royal Approbation.

Mr Speaker-Elect: Order. The House is suspended until 9.30 pm.

8.36 pm
Sitting suspended.

MESSAGE TO ATTEND THE LORDS COMMISSIONERS
Message from the Lords Commissioners delivered by the Lady Usher of the Black Rod.
The Speaker-Elect, with the House, went up to be presented to the Lords Commissioners for Her Majesty’s Royal Approbation; and returned.

Mr Speaker: I have to report that this House has been in the House of Lords where Her Majesty has been pleased, by Her Majesty’s Commissioners, to approve the choice made of myself for the office of Speaker.

My first duty to the House is to repeat my respectful acknowledgements and my grateful thanks for the great honour you have conferred upon me in placing me in the Chair and to renew the assurance of my entire devotion to the service of the House.

May I personally say thank you, folks?

ADJOURNMENT

Resolved, That this House do now adjourn.—(Mr Rees-Mogg.)

9.49 pm
House adjourned.
House of Commons

Tuesday 5 November 2019

The House met at half-past Eleven o’clock

PRAYERS

[Mr Speaker in the Chair]

Oral Answers to Questions

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

The Secretary of State was asked—

Syria

1. Ian Austin (Dudley North) (Ind): What assessment he has made of the effect of the US Administration’s decision to withdraw support for Kurdish forces on regional stability.

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Gentleman; he has followed this subject for a long period and has experience and insight. We are worried, and our main concerns are around the humanitarian situation and the stability of northern Syria. Notwithstanding the removal of Daesh leader al-Baghdadi, which we welcome, we are worried about the medium-term impact on counter-Daesh strategy in the region. So while we welcome the ceasefire brokered by Vice-President Mike Pence in relation to northern Syria, we are also seeing an accommodation between the Syrian Democratic Forces and the Syrian regime and indeed Presidents Erdoğan and Putin, and that is counter both to our counter-terrorism efforts but also to the humanitarian plight that the hon. Gentleman rightly raises.

Kerry McCarthy: May I add my congratulations to you, Mr Speaker?

Save the Children has identified around 60 British children who are stranded in north-east Syria. The Government have said that we owe them a duty of care. No matter what their parents may have done, these are innocent children, and some are now malnourished and some are suffering from life-threatening illnesses. What are the Government doing to ensure that those British children are repatriated?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady is right to say that the first responsibility is of course with any parent or prospective parent who would take their children out to a conflict zone. We have made it clear that we are willing to repatriate unaccompanied UK minors or orphans where is no risk to UK security. We would consider carefully individual requests for consular support more generally and subject to national security considerations, but of course the UK has no consular presence in Syria from which to provide assistance, and that makes it very difficult to help, but we respond on a case-by-case basis.

Mike Kane: This is an honour, Mr Speaker.

Mr Ahmed, a Syrian Kurdish constituent of mine, has relayed his deep concerns for family and friends in the region. Communities without security cannot prosper; what more can be done to secure a peace?

Dominic Raab: We talk to all the parties and players involved. Obviously there is an important NATO component. The US withdrawal of troops is, of course, a matter for them, but we note that a small residual number of troops are going to be left for counter-Daesh operations. We support the deconfliction mechanism that is in place to try to ensure that the airspace can be correctly and properly policed.

Crispin Blunt (Reigate) (Con): It is an honour, Mr Speaker, to be the first Back Bencher to be called from the Government Benches during your Speakership. I made my remarks about your predecessor a matter of formal record, and I hope I can now get called, which would be agreeable.

On this very serious issue, having recently been to the region may I urge my right hon. Friend and his colleagues to engage with the local leadership there when they make themselves available at ministerial level? On the conduct of the Turkish military operation, there is now
pretty incontrovertible evidence that white phosphorus has been used as a weapon against civilians, if not other chemical weapons, either by the Turks or by their Syrian auxiliary allies. This is a matter of immense seriousness; will the United Kingdom Government now hold Turkey and her allies to account?

**Dominic Raab:** Your tenure and leadership, Mr Speaker, are already producing changes on the Back Benches, which are hugely welcome. My hon. Friend is right to be concerned that we ensure we are engaged with key figures on the ground in northern Syria. In relation to white phosphorus, we are very concerned by the reports—which have not yet been fully verified, as we have said—and we want to see a swift and thorough investigation by the UN Commission of Investigation. That is what we are pressing for.

**Dr Matthew Offord** (Hendon) (Con): Before the shadow Foreign Secretary, the right hon. Member for Islington South and Finsbury (Emily Thornberry), stands up, may I be the first London MP to welcome you to your place, Mr Speaker? Will my right hon. Friend tell the House what international discussions are occurring with the Turkish Government in order to ensure a long-lasting peace?

**Dominic Raab:** I have spoken to the Turkish Foreign Minister and the Prime Minister spoke to President Erdoğan on 12 and 20 October, and we have made it clear that we are not willing to see demographic changes on the ground that would alter the balance in northern Syria. We are concerned about the humanitarian situation. It is welcome that the ceasefire is broadly holding, but we now need to see measures for a credible medium-term approach that allows us to continue to press our overarching approach that allows us to continue to press our overarching a significant national interest in the outcome of discussions, such as on security.

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**Stephen Gethins** (North East Fife) (SNP): On behalf of the Scottish National party, may I be the first Scottish MP to welcome you to your place, Mr Speaker? On 16 October, the Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs, the hon. Member for South Derbyshire (Mrs Wheeler), told the Foreign Affairs Committee that the UK was failing to attend meetings to discuss the situation in Syria, not least the increase in migration and the refugee crisis. Will the Foreign Secretary tell us what possible benefits there can be from failing to attend these meetings? What are the foreign policy implications of this, and will he change his mind about non-attendance?

**Dominic Raab:** I can reassure the hon. Gentleman that we are in close contact with all our bilateral partners, that we engage with our EU partners and that we have raised this situation in the UN Security Council. I have discussed it at the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, and the UK will be attending the next ministerial meeting of the Global Coalition against Daesh on 14 November in Washington.

**Stephen Gethins:** I am glad to hear that. The Brexit Secretary told us that the UK would only attend meetings of the EU Council where there was “a significant national interest in the outcome of discussions, such as on security.”

The situation in Syria strikes me as something that affects security as well as foreign policy, so I ask the Foreign Secretary again: will he change his mind, given that there are 27 key partners in there? It is increasingly striking that there are no benefits from leaving the European Union, but even worse, could it be that we have a Government so blinded and dogmatic over their commitment to turn away from Europe and embrace Trump that they will not even bother to turn up for these meetings? Does he not agree that this is having security and foreign policy implications right now?

**Dominic Raab:** I have to say to the hon. Gentleman that I think the blinkered prejudice is all on his own side. I have attended EU Gymnichs before the meetings with Foreign Ministers, because when we have security issues of course we want to engage with our EU partners. The reality is that we will continue to do that once we have left the EU, because we want to be strong European neighbours and allies as well as giving effect to the referendum in this country.

**UK Soft Power**

2. **Eddie Hughes** (Walsall North) (Con): What diplomatic steps is he taking to enhance UK soft power overseas.

17. **Michael Fabricant** (Lichfield) (Con): What the activities are of staff working in his Department on soft power; and if he will make a statement.

**The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Mrs Heather Wheeler):** As the first woman to speak, may I also congratulate you on your new job, Mr Speaker? The UK is home to world-class universities, cultural institutions and major sporting events that are known throughout the world and that help to promote our values and build relationships. We will keep investing in our soft power assets, including the British Council, the BBC World Service and Chevening scholarships, and engaging with partners as part of our role as a positive influence in the world.

**Eddie Hughes:** I thank the Minister for that answer, Mr Speaker, but more importantly I thank you, because I believe that our soft power overseas has already been enhanced as a result of your appointment to the Chair. May I ask the Minister what we will do with this newly enhanced soft power to speak up for persecuted Christians around the world?

**Mrs Wheeler:** Congratulations from the west midlands as well, Mr Speaker: everybody is congratulating you.

We actively use our influence to speak up for persecuted Christians and individuals of all faiths or beliefs at the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe and the UN, among other bodies. Throughout our diplomatic network, we lobby Governments for changes in laws and practices and raise individual cases of persecution in countries recently including Egypt, Indonesia and Sudan. I am delighted that my hon. Friend the Member for Gillingham and Rainham (Rehman Chishti), the PM’s special envoy for freedom of religion or belief is working very hard as well.
Michael Fabricant: Last summer, the Red Arrows went to North America on an 11-week deployment and I happened, by sheer coincidence, to be in Chicago with the Mayor of the West Midlands. Then we were walking along the esplanade and we saw the Red Arrows on display with around a million Chicagoans cheering the Royal Air Force, which was great. That is a great example of soft power, but when does my hon. Friend think that a soft power strategy might be published?

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my hon. Friend, with his great links to the west midlands and the Mayor of the West Midlands, all congratulating the Speaker on his new position. Of course, this was a great example of global Britain going forward. We are all incredibly proud of the Red Arrows and they are a great example of soft power. When the Red Arrows were out there, the engineers and the pilots ran STEM—science, technology, engineering and maths—workshops in schools throughout their route, which was an excellent opportunity to showcase our soft power. To put my hon. Friend's mind at rest, yes, we will introduce a strategy for soft power once we have won the general election and come back.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): No soft soap from me, Mr Speaker. The fact of the matter is that I have known you since you came into the House. I am really pleased that you are in the Chair and we at least have a northern voice. It is Lancastrian rather than Yorkshire, but it is nice to have a regional accent. It is very nice to see your dad up in the Gallery, another old Yorkshire, but it is nice to have a regional accent. It is Lancastrian rather than Yorkshire, but it is nice to have a regional accent. It is very nice to see your dad up in the Gallery, another old friend and colleague of ours. It is a very happy occasion for the Hoyles.

Now I am turning into angry mode. Will the Minister define what is soft power and what is hard power? Is what the Russians did to us in the last election, and possibly during the referendum, soft or hard power, what are we going to do about it and when are the Government going to publish this report that they are trying to hide from the public?

Mrs Wheeler: I am always concerned about the health of the hon. Gentleman, who has been unbelievably good as Chairman of his Select Committee. He is standing down and, honestly, we will miss him. To answer his question, absolutely: 0.7% is writ large. We are very proud that this is the Government that brought that in and put it on a statutory basis. As regards keeping DFID going after the election, let us get through the election.

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): As the first born and bred Lancastrian to catch your eye, Mr Speaker, may I also congratulate you and wish you well in your role? Last night, the director of the British Museum, Hartwig Fischer, came to dinner at the House of Commons. I wonder whether the Minister will join me in putting on the record our appreciation of the museum's work. Not only is it an extraordinary lending institution of artefacts around the world, but its work in Iraq, for example, where the British Museum trains men and women archaeologists, is doing so much to preserve and protect sites that have been destroyed by Daesh and others in recent years. If the Government are looking for an envoy for anything, I am going to be free. [Laughter.]

Mrs Wheeler: I thank my right hon. Friend for that wonderful question. I am delighted to include the British Museum's work as another area of soft power for the great UK and for global Britain everywhere. My right hon. Friend is standing down and will be greatly missed not only here but in the middle east, where his expertise and humanity are respected by everybody.

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): As the first Bury Member of Parliament to speak, may I congratulate you on your fantastic achievement, Mr Speaker? Following yesterday’s decision, which was based on merit, you have been able to bring a great sense of unity to the House.

Turning to soft power, what are the Government doing to make it clear to the Indian Government that we have extremely serious concerns about human rights abuses in Kashmir? What will the Government do to promote the concept of self-determination for the Kashmiri people? Time and again before elections, people on the Front Benches make commitments to promote self-determination, yet Governments have repeatedly failed to do anything about the issue when it comes to using soft power in international institutions.

Mrs Wheeler: That was a serious question, and it behoves me to give a serious answer. The Foreign Secretary has spoken to the Indian Foreign Secretary about the matter, raising our concerns about humanitarian issues, particularly in Kashmir. As for the election and commitments regarding an independent Kashmir, the matter should be sorted out on a bilateral basis between the two countries.

Relations with NATO Allies

3. Daniel Kawczynski (Shrewsbury and Atcham) (Con): What steps he is taking to strengthen relations with NATO allies.  [900298]
Daniel Kawczynski: When we finally leave the European Union in January, there will be six key strategic countries that are committed to the defence of our continent but are not members of the EU. Will my right hon. Friend commit to work with them and others across the continent to ensure that NATO remains the supreme defence posture, rather than the EU army proposed by Mr Verhofstadt and others?

Dominic Raab: My hon. Friend is a stalwart defender, supporter and champion of NATO and will know that we continue to meet our 2% defence spending target. We contribute to every NATO mission, including leading the Enhanced Forward Presence battlegroup in Estonia. We also lead the Joint Expeditionary Force of up to nine NATO allies and partners, and we do not want that to be undermined by anything done within the EU. Indeed, we want to keep EU, US and North American solidarity as strong as possible.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): On behalf of Her Majesty’s Opposition and the Labour Front-Bench team, may I welcome you to your new role, Mr Speaker? A vital part of co-operation with our NATO allies is defending ourselves against Russian attempts to interfere with our democracy. To that end, what possible reason can the Government have to delay the publication of the Intelligence and Security Committee report until after the general election? What on earth do they have to hide?

Dominic Raab: The right hon. Lady will know, as she has been in her post for quite a while now, that ISC reports go through a number of stages of clearance and other processes between the ISC and the Government. The reports often contain sensitive information, and I know that she would want to see the integrity of such information protected. The reports have to go through that process before they are published, and it usually takes several weeks to complete.

Mr Barry Sheerman (Huddersfield) (Lab/Co-op): Nonsense.

Dominic Raab: The recent average, just to respond to the hon. Gentleman, is six weeks. This report was only submitted on 17 October, so it has been handled correctly.

Emily Thornberry: I am surprised that the Secretary of State could answer with a straight face.

On a related issue, I ask the Foreign Secretary a simple yes or no question pursuant to my letter to him on Friday. Does Mr Cummings have unredacted access to top-secret intelligence and unrestricted access to top-secret meetings relating to NATO, Russia, Ukraine and Syria—yes or no?

Dominic Raab: I thank the right hon. Lady for her letter. As she knows, the Government and Ministers do not comment on security clearance, but the instruction in her letter that No. 10 is somehow in the grip of a Kremlin mole is frankly ridiculous, even by the standards of the loony left. What is troubling is that the leader of the Labour party sided with the Kremlin when it denied responsibility for the nerve agent attack in Salisbury in 2018—one more reason why this Labour party, under this leader, can never be trusted with Britain’s security.

Mr Jeremy Hunt (South West Surrey) (Con): The question is about NATO. Does the Foreign Secretary agree that one of the biggest fault lines in NATO at the moment is the fact that the largest partner is spending 4% of its GDP on defence, whereas no one else is spending much above 2%? Does he agree it is time for the UK to show a lead and commit to spending 3% of our GDP on defence in the next decade?

Dominic Raab: I pay tribute to the work my right hon. Friend did as Foreign Secretary. We are committed to and, indeed, are meeting our 2% commitment. Not all NATO members are, and we therefore continue to sympathise with the concerns of the US in that regard and encourage others to meet the commitment. I am sure the Chancellor of the Exchequer will look fondly and with interest at his suggestion of a 3% commitment.

Harry Dunn

4. Tom Brake (Carshalton and Wallington) (LD): If he will co-operate with any independent inquiry into the death of Harry Dunn.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): The Foreign Office has done everything it properly can to clear the path so that justice can be done for the family of Harry Dunn in this tragic case.

Tom Brake: I start by congratulating you, Mr Speaker, on your election. I know that you will want to defend the rights of this House against any rogue Executive. I extend my deepest sympathies to Harry Dunn’s family. Are the Government exploring routes to extradite the driver? Do they think they are likely to be successful, given that President Trump’s notes, which were caught on camera, appear to confirm that she will never return?

Dominic Raab: The right hon. Gentleman seems to be slightly confused about the process. A criminal investigation is being conducted by Northamptonshire police and the Crown Prosecution Service. There is no question of any extradition process, let alone of what any Government might do about it, until the CPS has taken its charging decision.

From the Foreign Office’s point of view, this is a deeply tragic case. We have expressed our disappointment and called for a review of the immunity question. It should be waived, and we have cleared, as best and as properly as we can, all obstacles to justice being done. It is now properly a matter for the police and the CPS, including in relation to any extradition matters that follow.
Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): The family and friends of Harry Dunn have been let down in the most appalling way, not just by the lack of justice for their son but by the complete lack of answers from the Government to questions that they and we have raised. May I therefore ask the Secretary of State one more simple question that any mourning family would want answered? Can he tell me how long Harry had to wait between being knocked off his motorbike and the arrival of an ambulance?

Dominic Raab: Like the right hon. Lady, we feel a huge amount of sympathy for the family, who are very distraught. We are doing everything we can to clear the path to an investigation. I do not know the answer to her question, but I gently say to her that on all these matters, particularly on something so sensitive, we should all proceed and talk about it responsibly.

Human Rights

6. Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): What diplomatic steps his Department is taking to (a) promote and (b) support human rights internationally.

The Minister for Africa (Andrew Stephenson): As a fellow Lancastrian MP, may I add my congratulations to you, Mr Speaker?

The UK has a strong history of protecting human rights and promoting our values globally. We do that through a mixture of bilateral and multilateral engagement and by working with and supporting civil society and others promoting respect for British values and democracy. The rule of law and human rights are and will remain a core part of our international diplomacy.

Liz Twist: It is hard to talk about human rights when one of the most flagrant breaches of those rights, the genocidal violence against the Rohingya people by the Myanmar military, remains completely unpunished. What are the latest plans to seek the referral of Myanmar to the International Criminal Court?

Andrew Stephenson: The UK has committed to finding a sustainable solution to the Rohingya crisis. We will continue to work in Myanmar and Bangladesh to ensure safe and dignified returns, and ensure that they are all voluntary. Through the European Union, we imposed sanctions on 14 individuals responsible for human rights violations during the 2017 Rohingya crisis. We will continue to work with the United Nations, the EU and other international actors to hold to account those responsible for these appalling atrocities.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): May I add the tributes of Kent to your speakership, Mr Speaker? May I also personally pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd), who has spoken up on human rights issues in this House for 30 years and has not tired of arguing for people around the world whose rights are challenged? May I also thank her for what she has done over the past two years, when she has been on the Foreign Affairs Committee and been an amazing friend, counsel and adviser? The last report that she has played her part in is on the human rights of this country and how democracies can defend themselves against autocratic influence from around the world. Does the Minister agree that there is much more we can do to defend academic freedoms in this country from Chinese influence and democratic freedoms from Russian influence?

Andrew Stephenson: The UK has a long tradition of protecting human rights domestically and fulfilling our international human rights obligations, but, as my hon. Friend the Chair of the FAC has just said, there are concerns about academic freedoms, particularly given the influence of China, and Russian interference. Those two issues are serious and I know that my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary pays close attention to them.

Fabian Hamilton (Leeds North East) (Lab): Yesterday’s Human Rights Watch report on Saudi Arabia revealed mass arrests of women’s rights activists in the past year and alleged that many of them had been sexually assaulted, whipped and tortured in detention. Does the Minister still think the Prime Minister was right to describe Crown Prince Salman two years ago as “a remarkable young man”?

Andrew Stephenson: The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia remains a Foreign and Commonwealth Office human rights priority country, particularly because of its use of the death penalty and its restrictions of women’s rights, freedom of expression and freedom of religious belief. We have raised human rights concerns repeatedly with the Government of Saudi Arabia, with this most recently having been done by my right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary.

Fabian Hamilton: The true answer is that when it comes to Mohammed bin Salman, this Government are all too willing to look the other way. Can the Minister explain how it was possible that in July the Department for International Trade illegally authorised licences for exports of arms to the royal Saudi land forces, a full 41 days after the Foreign Office was told that those forces were operating inside Yemen?

Andrew Stephenson: As the hon. Gentleman will be aware, the International Trade Secretary apologised for any export licences that were issued in error. We are carefully considering the implications of the judgment for decision making, and we will not grant any new licences for export to Saudi Arabia, or any other coalition partners, of any items that might be used in the conflict in Yemen.

Rehman Chishti (Gillingham and Rainham) (Con): Mr Speaker, may I join all colleagues around the House in congratulating you on your elevation to Speaker of the House?

The key human right is article 18 of the universal declaration of human rights and people being able to practise their religion openly and freely. May I pay a huge tribute to the former Foreign Secretary, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), for commissioning the Truro review of the persecution of Christians and the current Foreign Secretary for all the work that he and his team are doing in taking forward that review? Recommendation 10 requested the Foreign Secretary write to key organisations such as the British Council, the Westminster Foundation for Democracy and Wilton Park, so may I thank him for
writing that within 24 hours? Will he review this in 12 months to see how they are doing in taking forward freedom of religion and belief as part of that?

Andrew Stephenson: May I start by paying tribute to my hon. Friend for all the work he does and his recent appointment as the Prime Minister’s envoy for freedom of religion or belief? As he says, huge numbers of Christians around the world are being persecuted—it is currently estimated that 125 million Christians experience high or extreme levels of persecution. The Government have accepted all the recommendations from the bishop’s report, but my hon. Friend’s suggestion of a review is a good idea.

13. [900310] Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): Congratulations to you, Mr Speaker. I thank the Chairman of the Foreign Affairs Committee, the hon. Member for Tonbridge and Malling (Tom Tugendhat), for his comments. I have very much enjoyed being a member of that Committee.

Will the Minister clarify what steps have been taken to review all sales of arms to Saudi Arabia? I can hardly bear to say the word “Yemen”, but there have been thousands of Saudi air attacks on civilians targets—including homes, markets, weddings, funerals, schools, hospitals and buses—that have killed thousands of civilians, including many children. Surely, that is in breach of international law. I hope that we are taking all the necessary steps to highlight the complicity of countries such as the UK in the alleged violations of international law.

Andrew Stephenson: I pay tribute to the right hon. Lady for her years of service on the Foreign Affairs Committee, and for always doing all he can to speak up for his constituents. As she will be aware, we operate one of the most robust export control regimes in the world and take our licensing obligations seriously. When mistakes are made, things are investigated. As the Secretary of State for International Trade has said, the Government have apologised for the fact that export licences were issued in error, and we are investigating what happened.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): May I be the first Sussex Member of Parliament to be called in your Speakership to congratulate you on your election to the Chair, Mr Speaker? In that county, I am privileged to represent proba bly the largest number of Chagos islanders anywhere in the world. I have no doubt about UK sovereignty over the British Indian Ocean Territory; however, human rights have been neglected ever since the Wilson Administration forcibly evicted the Chagos islanders from their homeland in the late 1960s. Will the Minister assure me that, as we go forward, Chagos islanders human rights will be better respected in terms of a right of return and nationality issues?

Andrew Stephenson: I pay tribute to my hon. Friend for always doing all he can to speak up for his constituents. The United Kingdom Government have expressed sincere regret over this issue; however, in November 2016, the UK Government announced that the resettlement of Chagossians would not be supported on the grounds of feasibility, defence or security interests. The UK Government continue to the work with Chagossian communities to design a support package worth approximately £40 million, the intent of which is to support Chagossians here in the United Kingdom.

Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): What steps he is taking to strengthen consular support for UK nationals overseas.

The Minister for Africa (Andrew Stephenson): Our consular staff help more than 20,000 British people abroad every year, and we constantly strive to improve support, with more online services, updated information and specialist staff.

Chi Onwurah: As a Geordie, may I say what a pleasure it is to hear your northern tones bring order to our proceedings, Mr Speaker?

My constituent Christine Scott was falsely arrested and imprisoned in Ghana. She is disabled, with severe mobility issues, yet the sum total of her consular support during the 16 months of her ordeal was a list of lawyers. She remains deeply traumatised, but the Minister has yet to respond to my inquiry. His Department has suffered cuts of 30% since 2010 and now fights for funding with the Ministry of Defence and the Department for International Development—a situation that the Foreign Affairs Committee said was “unsustainable”—so what is he doing to ensure that the first priority of consular services is to support citizens like Christine and not to cut costs?

Andrew Stephenson: I thank the hon. Lady for her question. I have seen her letter, and I will be responding to it later today. I am also happy to meet her. The details of this case are rather more complex than she has suggested to the House. I also gently suggest—[Interruption.] Wait until we have a meeting. I would rather discuss the full details of the case. If she looks specifically at Africa, she will see that we are opening five new missions there and recruiting hundreds more staff. Our consular services are first-rate across the globe. We are enhancing the network. We should be supporting our consular staff in the incredible work that they do. They are being not cut, but totally supported by this Government in their work with British citizens across the globe.

Andrew Percy (Brigg and Goole) (Con): Mr Speaker, you might be from the wrong side of the Pennines, but it is a delight to see you in the Chair and for impartiality to be returned to that office.

As we continue to expand our consular network overseas, may I urge the Minister to look at the proposal that I recently wrote to the Prime Minister about with regard to a permanent consular post in Atlantic Canada, not only to support the very many Brits who travel there every year but to make better use of our trading relationship post Brexit?

Andrew Stephenson: I thank the hon. Lady for her comments. I have very much enjoyed being a member of that Committee.
Andrew Stephenson: The minister for the Middle East and North Africa is doing everything he can for the hon. Gentleman’s constituent. Providing consular assistance in Yemen is, of course, far from straightforward, but we will continue to keep up the pressure and to do everything we can.

Catherine West (Hornsey and Wood Green) (Lab): May I say how delighted I am to have a rugby league fanatic in the Chair, Mr Speaker?

Can the Minister update me on my constituent Aras Amiri? What urgent action is being taken in Tehran for this woman, who is a British Council employee? Tragically, her family here are heartbroken because they have not had an update on what is happening with her desperate case, following her imprisonment on false charges.

Andrew Stephenson: My right hon. Friend the Foreign Secretary will speak to the Iranian Foreign Minister later today. The treatment of British Iranians particularly is of grave concern. We repeatedly raise our concerns with the Iranian authorities, including through the Prime Minister, who raised this matter directly with President Rouhani during the United Nations General Assembly.

Topical Questions

T1. [900321] Liz Twist (Blaydon) (Lab): If he will make a statement on his departmental responsibilities.

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): Since the last oral questions, I visited the US to reaffirm our commitment to strengthening the special relationship. I spoke to the NATO Parliamentary Assembly, affirming our leading role in NATO and our commitment to it. Above all, I am focused on supporting the Prime Minister in getting Brexit done so that this country can move forward as an open, outward-looking country with global reach and global ambition.

Liz Twist: I missed my chance earlier to congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on your appointment, so may I take the opportunity to do so now?

Chinese state media yesterday urged the Hong Kong Government to take a tougher line against what it called “wanton violence” in the city. Will the Minister contact both his Chinese and Hong Kong counterparts, and say to them both that what is needed is a return to dialogue and democratic norms, not an even tougher line being taken against the demonstrators?

Dominic Raab: The hon. Lady’s point is one with which Members across the House would agree. We remain seriously concerned about the situation in Hong Kong and the recent violent clashes between protesters and the police. We condemn the minority of hardcore violent protesters, but also continue fully to support the right to peaceful protest. As the hon. Lady says, that
ought to be a stepping stone to political dialogue, particularly with the forthcoming local elections on 24 November in mind.

T2. Sir Desmond Swayne (New Forest West) (Con): Does not the blocking of Joshua Wong as a council candidate offend against the very basic principles of the Sino-British agreement, and what is the Secretary of State planning to do about it?

Dominic Raab: As I mentioned in my response to the hon. Member for Blaydon (Liz Twist), the local elections on 24 November will be an important milestone to see whether there can be a de-escalation of tensions in Hong Kong, and a path towards political dialogue and engagement that is consistent with the joint declaration and one country, two systems. I share my right hon. Friend’s concern about the barring of Joshua Wong because standing for election is a fundamental right enshrined in Hong Kong’s Basic Law, which itself reflects the one country, two systems model. We continue to make our concerns known to our Chinese partners.

T3. John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): Heartfelt congratulations, Mr Speaker.

Will the Foreign Secretary comment on the report overnight of the capture of the sister of Abu Bakr al-Baghdadi in north-west Syria? Does not this, and the death of the Daesh leader itself, underline the importance of our international alliances to keep British citizens and our communities safe from the threat of terror?

Dominic Raab: I pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman and congratulate him on his new appointment as an adviser at the Home Office on counter-extremism and counter-terrorism—a role that I know he will perform very effectively.

We do not comment on operational matters, as the hon. Gentleman will know. We welcome the removal of Baghdadi, but there is a much broader counter-Daesh strategy that we need to pursue. We need to keep all our partners together—which is why, frankly, some of the latent anti-Americanism that is preached by Opposition Front Benchers is deeply unhelpful.

T6. Andrew Stephenson: The UK is a world leader on tax compliance, with one of the lowest tax gaps in the world. The UK was a major sponsor of the OECD’s base erosion and profit shifting project and has adopted many of the recommendations. The Government also introduced the diverted profits tax, which came into effect on 1 April 2015 and counters the contrived arrangements used by some multinationals to divert profits from the UK.

Andrew Stephenson: The UK is a world leader on tax compliance, with one of the lowest tax gaps in the world. The UK was a major sponsor of the OECD’s base erosion and profit shifting project and has adopted many of the recommendations. The Government also introduced the diverted profits tax, which came into effect on 1 April 2015 and counters the contrived arrangements used by some multinationals to divert profits from the UK.

Dominic Raab: The hon. Gentleman has been a stalwart champion of human rights and has indeed taken a very close interest in foreign policy in relation to this region. He asks what we have done. As the Under-Secretary of State, my hon. Friend do all he can to press for international action to end this kind of disgraceful tax avoidance?

Andrew Stephenson: The UK is a world leader on tax compliance, with one of the lowest tax gaps in the world. The UK was a major sponsor of the OECD’s base erosion and profit shifting project and has adopted many of the recommendations. The Government also introduced the diverted profits tax, which came into effect on 1 April 2015 and counters the contrived arrangements used by some multinationals to divert profits from the UK.
do that because it is absolutely important. Even with some of our closest partners, we need to be able to have those candid conversations.

Richard Graham (Gloucester) (Con): In the eight years since I was first appointed the Prime Minister’s trade envoy to nations in south-east Asia and elected chair of the all-party China group, trade and investment in that region has increased sharply—as have challenges to our values in some areas. May I therefore thank officials at the Foreign Office and the Department for International Trade who balance these responsibilities so well? May I also welcome the Foreign Secretary’s first visit abroad to the ASEAN summit in Bangkok?

Does he agree that we should do all we can to participate in the Trans-Pacific Partnership and deepen our role with the nations of ASEAN?

Dominic Raab: I pay tribute to all my hon. Friend’s tireless efforts and work. The Asia-Pacific region covered by the trans-Pacific trade agreement and ASEAN is a hugely important relationship for us. They are growth markets of the future, and we have perhaps not invested in partners there as much as we could have. While ensuring that we remain strong trading partners and allies with our European partners, leaving the EU allows us to invest more and with renewed vigour and enthusiasm in that critical region. That will bring dividends in jobs, free trade and advantages for consumers at home, and it also allows us to project our influence and soft power, as we have been discussing in this House.

T7. [00303] Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): Teesside also celebrates your election to the Chair, Mr Speaker.

This morning, Israel’s Supreme Court confirmed its Government’s decision to deport Human Rights Watch’s director for Israel and Palestine, Omar Shakir. That decision comes amid the worrying closing of civil society space for those advocating human rights in that country. Will the Government urge Israel to reverse its decision and allow Human Rights Watch to continue its vital work?

Dominic Raab: I know at first hand from my time working on human rights in war crimes and for human rights NGO Liberty how important the work of Human Rights Watch is. We want to see that continue, and of course we support it in general terms. We discuss a whole range of issues with our Israeli partners. The Israeli Supreme Court has a strong record of independence and has held the Executive to account on many occasions. It is important that we respect the separation of powers there as well.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): Warmest congratulations to you from Worcestershire, Mr Speaker.

The Foreign Secretary mentioned the transatlantic relationship in his opening remarks. We have not had a UK ambassador in Washington for four months. Can he update the House on when he expects that appointment to be made, and can he also rule out appointing Mr Nigel Farage to such a position?

Dominic Raab: Our embassy in the US does a terrific job on a whole range of issues, from trade to security co-operation. I have been out there twice since my appointment, and I know how much commitment and hard work they put in. We are taking our time, to ensure that we get the appointment of the next ambassador right, and I think my hon. Friend need not lose any sleep over the prospect of it being Mr Farage.

Patrick Grady (Glasgow North) (SNP): I suppose I am the first person to congratulate you twice, Mr Speaker.

Can the Foreign Secretary tell us how the UK’s standing as a soft power superpower is enhanced by its continuing refusal to comply with the UN General Assembly resolution that it should withdraw its colonial administration from the Chagos islands by 22 November this year?

Dominic Raab: We contribute to soft power in all sorts of ways, from our entrepreneurs and our world-beating innovators to the popularity of the arts and the English language overseas. The hon. Gentleman raises the specific issue of the British Indian Ocean Territory. We have no doubt about our sovereignty in that regard. It has been under continuous British sovereignty since 1814; Mauritius has never held sovereignty over the territory. We were disappointed that what was effectively a bilateral dispute was referred to the International Court of Justice and the UN General Assembly. The point of principle is that that circumvents the basic tenet that the ICJ should not consider bilateral disputes without the consent of both parties.

Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Congratulations, Mr Speaker.

In the light of the Foreign Secretary’s rather dismissive response to his predecessor on defence spending, is he aware that the Defence Committee, on which four parties are represented, has recommended 3% of GDP as a realistic medium-term goal? Does he accept that 2% of GDP on defence is a minimum? It is a floor, not a ceiling.

Dominic Raab: I pay tribute to all the work that my right hon. Friend has done in this House on security over the years. I certainly hope that I was not dismissive. We have just had one comprehensive spending review. There are competing bids going to the Chancellor on a whole range of issues, but he makes an important point. We are committed, as a stalwart NATO ally, to 2%, and we will certainly consider the report that he referred to as we consider the next CSR.

Imran Hussain (Bradford East) (Lab): I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, and I refer the House to my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests. Following on from the Secretary of State’s previous response, it is three months today since the draconian illegal blockade in Kashmir began. Thousands continue to be arrested without any due process. There are food shortages and medicine shortages, and persecution, oppression and injustice continue, yet the UK Government remain silent. The United Nations Security Council remains silent, and the international community remain silent. The sons and daughters of Kashmir are asking a simple question: does a Kashmiri child not feel the same pain as any other child? Does a Kashmiri child not bleed in the same way as any other child? Is a Kashmiri child’s death not worth the same as any other child’s death? Why is the world silent?

Dominic Raab: I thank the hon. Gentleman, and I understand the passion with which he raises this issue. Of course we feel for the suffering of anyone in Kashmir,
and we certainly have not been quiet on this issue. I have raised it with the Indian Foreign Minister, and we have discussed it with our partners. It has been discussed in international forums more widely, so I can reassure him and his constituents on both sides that we continually raise and will continue to raise these matters with the Indian Government. Equally, the wider issue of Kashmir, as has already been said in the Chamber, is a bilateral dispute that we feel—and, indeed, the UN Secretary Council resolutions and the international community have said—ought to be resolved bilaterally. We would certainly encourage and want to facilitate all those efforts to achieve that solution.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): Given the events of the last few years, I am not sure whether it is congratulations or commiserations I should offer you, Mr Speaker, but I certainly express my pleasure at your appointment.

When we return from the election and this House sits after the election campaign, it will be midwinter in northern Syria and 60 British children will be living in tents there. May I again ask the Foreign Secretary to revise, as a matter of urgency, our policy on their return?

Dominic Raab: I thank my right hon. Friend, and we certainly share his concerns about the humanitarian situation. I have already made clear the UK’s policy on unaccompanied minors and orphans: we are willing to see them repatriated. We will consider wider requests for consular support more generally, subject to national security concerns. The real challenge we have is that we do not have a consular presence in Syria, and accessing the children—or anyone else of UK nationality for that matter—is very difficult, but we do respond to all cases on a case-by-case basis.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mr Speaker: Questions are now over, but may I tell anyone standing that their name will be down for next time as a matter of urgency? Let us get the priorities working correctly.
Points of Order

12.31 pm

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. I seek your guidance. In the remaining hours before purdah, what steps are available to the House to require the Secretary of State for Transport to publish the Oakervie review of High Speed 2? Whistleblowers have revealed that this is one of the great public scandals, I believe, of our generation, and it has led to parliamentarians making decisions based on entirely false information about the development of the scheme. May I seek this guidance from you, Mr Speaker: in the remaining hours before purdah, what can we do to get this report published?

Mr Speaker: That is not a matter for the Chair, but the hon. Gentleman has done the right thing: he has put it on the record, and I hope those on the Government Front Bench are listening and may come back about that while we still have time.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. Ever mindful that this Parliament is coming to an end very shortly, may I ask what we can do in this House to ensure that something happens about the persecution of Christians? The number of countries where Christians suffer because of their faith rose from 128 in 2015 to 144 a year later. The very survival of Christianity as a living religion is in doubt. What can be done by the Foreign Secretary before purdah to make sure something happens right away?

Mr Speaker: I finished questions earlier, but you have certainly put that point on the record.

Seema Malhotra (Feltham and Heston) (Lab/Co-op): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. May I ask your advice about what may happen during the parliamentary Dissolution? I am particularly concerned about how I may raise the case of Mr Benjamin Williams from my constituency. A wheelchair-bound young man with degenerative spine disease, he has had great difficulty getting the services he needs from Shepherds Bush Housing Group, which seems to have been obstructive in every respect in relation to leaks, the fact that his windows do not close and other matters. Can you give me some advice about how I can raise this issue further, particularly to make sure that he gets the support he needs prior to Christmas?

Mr Speaker: You are quite right to raise such an issue on behalf of a constituent, but we can still write to Ministers during that period. I think you need to make sure you get your letter off today, but I do hope they have already been listening.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): On a point of order, Mr Speaker. As Chairman of Ways and Means, you were assiduous in your defence of Members’ rights and Members’ security. As the general election begins, we are hearing reports that candidates in part of the United Kingdom are pulling out due to threats of violence. Will you assure the House that you are liaising with police forces across all parts of this United Kingdom—Northern Ireland, Scotland, Wales and England—because some communities seem to think that violence is the way to ensure that their opponents do not stand against them?

Mr Speaker: The hon. Gentleman asks a very important question. A letter will be going out to Members of the House who are standing for re-election, to reassure them about what measures are in place. I gave evidence to Lord Bew on his report. I will not go into the details now, but what I will say is that all police forces are well aware that all candidates matter, and support will be given to them.
The Intelligence and Security Committee

Report on Russia

12.35 pm

Mr Dominic Grieve (Beaconsfield) (Ind) (Urgent Question): To ask the Prime Minister if he will make a statement on his refusal to give clearance to the report on Russia by the Intelligence and Security Committee of Parliament.

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Christopher Pincher): As the first Member who has no particular hook on which to hang their congratulations to you, Mr Speaker, may I in any event, and rather gratuitously, welcome you to the Chair?

I would like to answer my right hon. and learned Friend’s question regarding publication of the ISC’s report on Russia. The ISC provides invaluable scrutiny and oversight of the work of the intelligence community to Parliament, so I am grateful to it for conducting this timely inquiry into our work on Russia. Russia’s reckless behaviour in Salisbury and Amesbury shows that, now more than ever, we cannot afford to be complacent about the Russian threat.

Because the ISC deals with matters of national security and intelligence, its reports always contain sensitive information, so it is entirely right that they go through an intensive security review before publication. This report is one of a number of ISC reports that the Government are currently considering. The current length of time that this report has been with the Government is not unusual, as this has averaged around six weeks for reports published in recent years, and three to four weeks for a response to be forthcoming from the Government.

For example, the details of the counter-terrorism review following the attacks and the 2017-18 annual report were sent together to No. 10 on 12 October 2018. We were asked to respond 10 days later on 26 October. We responded on 8 November, and then the checked, proofread report was published on 22 November. Similarly, the details of the detainees report were sent to No. 10 on 10 May 2018. Again, the ISC asked for a response within 10 working days on 24 May. We responded on 30 May, and then the checked, proofread report was published on 12 June. In both cases, the process took approximately six weeks, because by law it is imperative that the process is thorough.

In accordance with the Justice and Security Act 2013, the impact of releasing sensitive information must be carefully considered by the Prime Minister on the advice of civil servants. We cannot rush the process and risk undermining our national security. There is no set timeline within the memorandum of understanding with the Committee for the Government to clear such reports for publication, and under the same memorandum there is no set timeline for a response, nor is such a deadline set in the governing legislation.

I want to assure the House that the Committee is well informed of this process, which is continuing along standard parameters that apply before every publication. Once the process has been completed, we will continue to keep all relevant parties and the House informed.

Mr Grieve: Mr Speaker, may I once again warmly congratulate you on your election?
indeed, because the reports that issue from the ISC are important. They carry weight and therefore they must be properly looked at. That is what No. 10 is doing. That is what the Prime Minister is doing by referring to his officials for advice, which is his right and responsibility.

As to leaks, we see quite a few of those and we deplore them all. I certainly would not want anybody to believe that what is in a leak, particularly if it appears on the front pages of certain newspapers, is believable.

Emily Thornberry (Islington South and Finsbury) (Lab): Thank you very much, Mr Speaker, for granting this urgent question. May I thank the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve) for securing it and for all his efforts?

I can only echo the words of the right hon. and learned Gentleman about the utterly unjustifiable, unprecedented and clearly politically motivated reasons for delaying the publication of the report until after the election. This is not at the request of the intelligence agencies. There are no foreign powers we have to consult, which was the reason for the delay of the rendition report. This is nothing less than an attempt to suppress the truth from the public and from Parliament, and it is an affront to our democracy.

We are bound to ask: what is Downing Street so worried about? Why would it not welcome an official report on attempted Russian interference in the 2016 referendum, whether that was successful or otherwise? I fear it is because it realises that the report will lead to other questions about the links between Russia and Brexit, and with the current leadership of the Tory party, that risk derailing its election campaign. There are questions about the relationship between the FSB-linked Sergey Nalobin and his “good friend”, the current Prime Minister. There are questions about the Prime Minister’s chief aide, Dominic Cummings, his relationship with Oxford academic Norman Stone, the mysterious three years that he spent in post-communist Russia aged just 23, and the relationships that he allegedly forged with individuals such as Vladislav Surkov, the key figure behind Vladimir Putin’s throne. And there are questions about the amount of money flowing into Conservative coffers from Russian émigrés, about the sources of money that paid for the Brexit campaign, and about the dubious activities of Conservative Friends of Russia.

If the Minister is going to dismiss all that as conspiracy theories or smears and say that it has nothing to do with the delay of the report, I say back to him: prove it. Publish this report and let us see for ourselves. Otherwise, there is only question: what have you got to hide?

Christopher Pincher: Before I answer his question, I would like to say farewell to my right hon. Friend, who has been a steadfast Member of this House and a doughty champion of defence and security issues, both here and on the ISC. He asks a straightforward question. I will give him the straightforward answer. The Prime Minister has a responsibility under the 2013 Act to properly and carefully adjudicate upon the report before him, and that is what he is doing, but it takes some time.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): I pay tribute to the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve). He and I disagree on a wide range of issues, but his fairness and scrupulousness in holding to account both his own Government and others, such as me, is a credit to the entire House.

The Russian Government’s greatest victims are their own people, with human rights abuses, and human rights and democracy activists, opposition groups and minorities targeted. I spent several years working in the former Soviet Union, and we in the Foreign Affairs Committee have visited as well, and I pay tribute to the bravery of those who campaign for fairness, the rule of law and democracy in that country. Surely the greatest riposte we can make, and the greatest support we can give those campaigners, is to show that democracy, openness and transparency in the UK are something to look up to. I fear that in this case they are not.

I hope the Minister is embarrassed by what he has just heard from the members of the ISC. Their questions were damming, and I am not surprised he did not
Christopher Pincher: The Government are prepared to be robust and transparent with respect to Russia—look at the way we carefully collated, assessed, scrutinised and presented the evidence of the Kremlin’s involvement in the attacks in Salisbury and Amesbury, and at the way we built an international alliance that responded to that threat. We are perfectly prepared to be robust and transparent with respect to Russia.

The hon. Gentleman asked about evidence of Russia’s involvement in our elections. There is no evidence of any successful Russian involvement in the British electoral cycle. I would ask him to be careful, thoughtful and considerate at this febrile time, as the House dissolves before the general election, and to allow the Prime Minister his right and his duty to assess what is in the report. Then we can produce a report in good time.

Mr David Davis (Haltemprice and Howden) (Con): When the Minister talked about the ISC, he referred to the Justice and Security Act 2013—the latest Act that crystallised the practical approach to the running of the ISC in the years since it was created by the Intelligence Services Act 1994. That Act created an arrangement for the Committee that balanced national security with the right to scrutiny and redaction and the right of the Prime Minister to approve the report before it is released. It rested on balance and on both sides—the House and the Government—treating the other side fairly. That is what is missing here. By not releasing the report, all the Minister does is create a vacuum for the paranoid fantasies we have heard from the Opposition to fill.

Christopher Pincher: As ever, I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, though he will appreciate that I cannot be responsible for the paranoid fantasies of Opposition Members. I can only say that the report was received by the Government on 17 October. It is not unusual for such reports to take six weeks to turn around or for a Government response to take anywhere between three and four weeks. Given the circumstances—given all the other things going on—I am not surprised the report is taking a little time to turn around. That does not mean it is being suppressed or withheld in any way; it simply means it is being properly considered.

Mr Speaker: I call David Hanson.

David Hanson (Delyn) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker—and congratulations.

As a Labour member of the ISC, I support the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), the Chair of the Committee, and share his concerns. The security services have cleared our report, the Cabinet Office has cleared our report, and we have made recommendations to the Prime Minister. Since receiving the report, has the Prime Minister read it, and has he submitted any redactions? I do not need to know what they are, but has he read it and has he submitted redactions? If not, why does he not publish today?

Christopher Pincher: A report such as this—a sensitive report that is 50 pages long—requires careful consideration. As I said, it was submitted on 17 October and is being reviewed by all the relevant official and ministers within government and at No. 10. The Committee will be informed of that process, and when the Prime Minister has concluded that the report is publishable, he will publish it.

Mr Steve Baker (Wycombe) (Con): Are the Government not entitled not to be bullied into accelerating the release of important national security reports? Would it not be a dangerous precedent to establish that the Committee can come to the House and bully the Government into releasing such an important and sensitive report?

Christopher Pincher: I do not think the Government are being bullied. Certainly we are not prepared to be bullied. We want to make sure the report is given proper and careful consideration and that any further changes to or questions of it can be addressed. Then a properly balanced report can be published.

Mr Speaker: I call Stella Creasy.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Thank you, Mr Speaker—it has a nice ring to it, doesn’t it?

We all in the House will know from our email inboxes that one of the challenges facing our current politics is that people watch too much Netflix and so are convinced that there are many conspiracies. That said, given that, as ISC members have said, many foxes have been set loose—reports about Sergey Nalobin, about Dominic Cummings’s security clearance, about Alexander Temerko’s friendship with the Prime Minister, about the use of the Lycamobile offices; given that the security agencies say they are happy to see the report, which the Government have had since March, published; given the cross-party support for it to be published; and given that Earl Howe in the House of Lords yesterday said it is the Prime Minister and the Prime Minister alone who needs to publish it, does the Minister recognise that the best way to kill the conspiracy theories is to put it out in the open? Former Prime Ministers have told us that sunlight is the best disinfectant. Why has this Prime Minister closed the blinds?

Christopher Pincher: The best way to avoid conspiracy theories is for people not to peddle them, and the hon. Lady just made a valiant effort in so doing. I have explained why it is taking some time to consider the report. We will consider it carefully and make sure it is a robust report, and then it will be published in due course.

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I would certainly welcome a debate on covert and malign foreign influence—not only any attempts on our side but why Seumas Milne always seems to peddle the Kremlin’s line and the links between senior people around the leader of the Labour party and pro-Russian groups in Ukraine and elsewhere. There would be a lot of interesting debate there.

My question to the Minister is a broader one. Does he agree that the best way to minimise the chances of malign and covert interference in our electoral system is through the introduction of a foreign agents registration Act? The US introduced one against covert Nazi influence in 1938 and the Australians produced a foreign influence
transparency scheme just last year. I will be working with the Henry Jackson Society to produce a potential template Bill. Would the Minister be interested in discussing it with me should we both be re-elected in December?

Christopher Pincher: I am always interested to hear the ideas and read the reports of my hon. Friend. I would certainly be interested to see the work that parliamentary draftsmen may have to undertake in defining a foreign agent. Foreign agents tend to keep themselves rather quiet, it seems to me, so identifying them may be a challenge; but I am always interested to see what my hon. Friend has to offer. If we are both re-elected—and I wish him well in that enterprise—then of course, on the other side, we will talk.

Mr Ben Bradshaw (Exeter) (Lab): Welcome, Mr Speaker.

Given the gaps and inaccuracies in his account of the three years that he spent in Russia, why was Dominic Cummings inexplicably granted the highest developed vetting status, yet is routinely denied access to secret intelligence? What damage is this unprecedented arrangement doing to our vital security arrangements with our Five Eyes partners?

Christopher Pincher: I am not going to comment on individual public servants. All I would say is that in asking the question that he asks, the right hon. Gentleman appears to be less a Member of Parliament than a walk-on member of a show like “24”.

Richard Benyon (Newbury) (Con): In my time on the Intelligence and Security Committee, I have built up a healthy respect for the way in which we conduct parliamentary scrutiny of our secret intelligence agencies. Indeed, other Parliaments from around the world come to see how we do it. There is much in the report that I would love to be able to talk about here, and I would love to address some of the more eccentric conspiracy theories that we have heard peddled here, but it comes down to this. We have a highly respected system of parliamentary oversight which is trusted across the House. Does my right hon. Friend not feel that in the absence of this report’s publication, we have created a climate which has allowed some quite bizarre conspiracy theories to be peddled, and that it would be much better to publish what has been written in the way in which the Committee produced it?

Christopher Pincher: Let me also bid farewell to my right hon. Friend, who has been a fine Member of Parliament for Newbury over the last 18 years. We will miss him: we will miss his intelligence, his care and his consideration. He wonders whether, by acting in a different way, we would reduce the propensity towards conspiracy theories. I suspect that the answer is no. I think that those conspiracy theories would find their way into the light in any event, thanks to some Opposition Members.

All I can do is to repeat what I have already said to my hon. Friend the Member for Wycombe (Mr Baker). This report requires careful consideration. It requires the Prime Minister to do his duty by the Justice and Security Act, and that is what he will do.

Chuka Umunna (Streatham) (LD): Many congratulations from these Benches on your election, Mr Speaker.

There are serious questions to be answered. I say to Members that this is perfectly legitimate for Members on this side of the House to ask the questions that we are asking. Our job is to scrutinise what the Government are doing. Clearly there are serious questions to be answered in relation to the role of Mr Dominic Cummings, one of the most senior officials in Government. Perhaps the answers will allay our concerns, but we deserve to hear those answers.

I have to say that the Minister’s response today has been utterly shameful. Let me ask him this. Is he denying that, if the shoe was on the other foot and he was at the Opposition Dispatch Box, he would be asking for the report to be published, as we are?

Christopher Pincher: The job of Members of Parliament is to scrutinise legislation and reports and not to fantasise about them, which is what I think all too many Opposition Members are doing. The Government have a duty to scrutinise properly the report that was presented to them by the ISC on 17 October. The Prime Minister has a duty to ask searching questions about the report, and to satisfy himself that nothing in it breaches our security privileges and the national security of the country. When that job is done, and not before, the report will be published.

Mark Pritchard (The Wrekin) (Con): Is it not the case that there is no conspiracy and no cover-up, and that this is just a manifestation of a considered bureaucratic process? May I draw the Minister’s attention to some comments that my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield has made over the past 24 hours? As a matter of courtesy, I informed his office that I would be making these comments. To the media, he said, “I can think of no good reason why the ISC report is not being published.” While my right hon. and learned Friend is indeed very learned, the fact that he does not know of a reason does not necessarily mean that there is not a reason. I wonder whether the Minister can confirm that.

Christopher Pincher: My right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield has every right to ask questions and make comments in the media. That is his duty as a Member of Parliament, and his right as the Chairman of the ISC. However, it is the duty of the Prime Minister, with his officials, to consider the report properly. That is what he is doing, and until that job is done properly the report should not be published—and the turnaround for publication is not unusual.

Sir George Howarth (Knowsley) (Lab): Congratulations, Mr Speaker.

The Minister says that the process that he is going through at the moment is not unusual, and the secretariat of the ISC says that it is unprecedented. Both cannot be right. Will the Minister take account of the fact that the secretariat, the Cabinet Office, the whole civil service and the security agencies have all said that no problem of national security is involved? Surely he must conclude that if this is not a matter of national security, the reason why the report is not being published is political. Will he take my advice and publish, or be damned?

Christopher Pincher: The timelines for the submission of the report, relative to the timelines of submissions of previous reports, speak for themselves. The CT attacks
report took about six weeks to turn around, with four weeks between its submission and a response from the Government, and the detainees report took about three weeks from the point of submission to the point of response. Such timelines are not unusual, and, although I am sure that they were made in absolute good faith, I do not recognise the comments of the ISC secretariat. The timelines speak for themselves.

Tom Tugendhat (Tonbridge and Malling) (Con): The Minister is entirely right to say that scrutiny dispels fantasy, and this is one of those moments when I feel that scrutiny would be entirely appropriate to dispel that fantasy. There can be few Members like my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Beaconsfield (Mr Grieve), or my right hon. Friend the Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson), or, indeed, many other members of the ISC, who were all personally chosen by the Prime Minister for their judgment, their character and their wisdom. Would it not be appropriate—at a moment when the country is focused on the most important democratic event that we will hold for, certainly, a number of years—for the information that is needed for us to judge its legitimacy to be put before the House, so that people can see the fantasy that some are claiming, and this can all go away?

Christopher Pincher: I do not question the probity of those who have compiled this report, and I certainly recognise the wisdom of my hon. Friend, who chairs the Foreign Affairs Committee. I therefore think it unfortunate that some in the House have chosen to question the probity of Government officials and the wisdom of the Prime Minister in properly scrutinising an important report that has been laid before him. As I have said, that report went to No. 10 on 17 October. It will be properly scrutinised, but that set of considerations has not been concluded yet.

Afzal Khan (Manchester, Gorton) (Lab): May I add my congratulations, Mr Speaker?

I have a very simple question for the Minister. There is clearly unease about the delay in the report’s publication. Will the Minister confirm that it is not being withheld in the interests of the Conservative party?

Christopher Pincher: No, it is not.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): Congratulations on your election as well from me, Mr Speaker.

The Minister, sent by the Prime Minister so that he can avoid scrutiny himself, says that the length of time that the report has been with the Government is not unusual, but will he acknowledge that the report itself is unusual because it is about interference in elections and we are just about to embark on a general election? So if the Government continue to block it after the security services have cleared it, that can only be either because they do not take the ISC Committee seriously or because they have something to hide, and can the Minister clarify which of those two it is?

Christopher Pincher: That was another of those questions: there we go again with a little light fantasising. The Committee has produced a serious report—
like Tony Benn, he will retire from the House of Commons and go into real politics; we shall see. He asked whether there are examples of unsuccessful interference in British politics, and the way that the Kremlin has behaved is clear; we have seen examples overseas of attempts at electoral interference, and of attempts at fake news and disinformation, most recently in Georgia. What I would say is that we have robust systems in place in this country to defend ourselves against such attacks, and that is why I say that such attacks have not been successful.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): We know that there was overseas interference in the US presidential election and the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee in its disinformation report last year called for an independent inquiry based on evidence that we produced to the Government. That request to the Government was rejected, and is not the problem that this decision to withhold this report is part of a course of conduct by this Government to refuse to look at whether there has been the level of interference that many in the country believe?

Christopher Pincher: The hon. Gentleman also may be leaving the Commons very soon, and I wish him well in his future path. He asked a reasonable question because disinformation tactics continue to evolve and therefore we must always be on our guard. The “Online Harms” White Paper that the Government produced commits us to introducing a duty of care on online companies to tackle a wide range of online harms, and they include limiting the spread of disinformation. With respect to the election in the United States, of course lots of comments have been made and suggestions and allegations have been heard. I am not going to comment on the US election; all I can say is that I think the US has as robust a system as we do.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (LD): I welcome you to your new post, Mr Speaker.

Further to the previous question, I am not in the business of peddling conspiracy theories, but I do look at credible sources and was disturbed by the release of the US Senate Select Committee on Intelligence report last month that did find Russian interference in the 2016 presidential election, which makes the release of this report all the more important, all the more relevant and all the more imperative as we embark on the democratic process of an election in our country. Can the Minister confirm this today: has the Prime Minister read the report?

Christopher Pincher: The hon. Lady is right to draw attention to the actions of the Kremlin in states abroad. I have said that we have evidence from around the world of activity that is malign and malicious. I believe that we here in the UK have a robust set of systems in place to defend ourselves. We will look closely at the report that the right hon. and learned Member for Beaconsfield and his Committee have submitted to the Government. It is going through the No. 10 process and at the end of that rigorous review process we will see the report.

Neil Coyle (Bermondsey and Old Southwark) (Lab): Congratulations on your election, Mr Speaker.

We have heard from several Members of the ISC this afternoon, including three sitting behind the Minister, and all have highlighted that every security agency required to do so has signed off this report, as has the Cabinet Office. The unprecedented delay is due to the Prime Minister. Is that because the Prime Minister is acting in the unprecedented fashion of subjugating national security to personal and political interests and his loyalty to Dominic Cummings, a man already found to be in contempt of Parliament?

Christopher Pincher: The short answer is no. The report has to go through a proper and rigorous process of scrutiny. It was submitted to the Government on 17 October. The time being taken to scrutinise it is not unusual; to say it is unprecedented is not accurate. Other reports—other sensitive reports, and complicated reports—have taken between four and six weeks to turn around; this important and sensitive report is no different.

Stephen Timms (East Ham) (Lab): Congratulations to you.

Mr Speaker: Last, but certainly not least, representing the safest seat in the country I call Stephen Timms.

Stephen Timms: Thank you, Mr Speaker, and many congratulations to you.

The Committee Chair reminds us that if the Prime Minister is unable to respond within 10 days he is required to provide an explanation for that failure. He has not provided an explanation, which, we understand, is unprecedented. Why has the Prime Minister not complied with the requirement placed upon him?

Christopher Pincher: It is because there is no requirement. The memorandum of understanding with the Committee is clear about the rules: there is no set timeline for a response and there is no set deadline in the governing legislation. The Prime Minister has a duty under the 2013 Act to look carefully and considerately at such reports. That is what No. 10 is doing, that is what the Prime Minister will do, and when that work is completed the report will be published.
Thomas Cook Customers

1.19 pm

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrea Leadsom): May I first sincerely congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on your new role? I also wish all hon. and right hon. Members who are retiring today every success for their future.

With your permission, Mr Speaker, I would like to make a statement on the Government’s actions to support customers of Thomas Cook. As the House knows, Thomas Cook entered into insolvency proceedings on 23 September. This has been a hugely worrying time for the employees of Thomas Cook and its customers, and the Government have done, and continue to do, all they can to support them. This has included the biggest peacetime repatriation effort ever seen in the UK, with around 140,000 people successfully flown home thanks to the efforts of the Secretary of State for Transport, my right hon. Friend the Member for Welwyn Hatfield (Grant Shapps) and his Department, and to the Civil Aviation Authority. In the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, we have set up a cross-Government taskforce alongside local stakeholders to support employees and supply chains.

I am sorry to have to inform the House, however, that the official receiver has recently brought to my attention further impacts of Thomas Cook’s insolvency, which I wish to share with the House today. There is an important outstanding matter relating to personal injury claims against Thomas Cook companies, impacting customers who have suffered life-changing injuries, illness or loss of life while on Thomas Cook holidays. Thomas Cook took out insurance cover only for the very largest personal injury claims. For agreed claims below this figure, up to a high aggregate amount, the company decided to self-insure through a provision in its accounts. As Thomas Cook has entered liquidation without ensuring any protection for pending claims, the vast majority of claimants who have suffered serious injuries and loss of life, will be treated as unsecured creditors. This means that it is uncertain whether they will receive any of the compensation they would ordinarily have received against their claims. This raises a potentially unacceptable prospect for some Thomas Cook customers, who face significant financial hardship through no fault of their own, have been severely impacted by the collapse of Thomas Cook. I commend this statement to the House.

1.24 pm

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): As your next-door-but-one constituency neighbour, Mr Speaker, may I congratulate you on your election?

I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. She is right to raise these matters today, because they raise serious questions that will need far more attention in the new Parliament, whichever Minister is at the Dispatch Box. I also have some questions today to take this forward.

In her statement, the Secretary of State mentioned a “high aggregate amount”. Can she tell us more about what that is? On the question about audit, to which I will return shortly, will she tell us why no regulation was in place to ensure that this serious weakness did not materialise? I should also like to put on record my thanks to all those involved in bringing 140,000 holiday-makers home.

We welcome the fact that the online services have now been bought, and that shops in the constituencies of Members across the House are being reopened by Hays Travel, but why oh why did Thomas Cook have to close first, and why were the opportunities that were given to the shops and online services not given to the airline? Intervention to ensure the retention of those viable parts of the business would have been a major step towards addressing the serious weaknesses that the Secretary of State identified in her statement. The Government were told at the time that parts of the business were successful, and Hays Travel clearly agreed because it bought the shops. There is also value in the brand, which is why the online business has been recovered. Could the airline have been saved, as the ones in Germany and Scandinavia were, if the liquidation had been delayed?

Why did the Government not listen to those calling for intervention? Why did they not take a stake in the company, so that the shops and digital business could have been transferred while still trading and so that other parts of the business could have been saved? Let us remember that the Turkish and Spanish Governments wanted to step in. They saw the potential
value, but our Government did not. Had our Government intervened, the hardship to which the Secretary of State rightly referred could have been identified and possibly avoided. Does she regret her failure to speak to the company and to intervene to protect the jobs and rights of workers? Had the company continued trading, with the Government holding a stake, the rights of workers would have been protected. It is good news that staff will now have jobs with Hays Travel, but will they be paid for the time since Thomas Cook closed? Will their rights from their years of service be protected? Are staff being TUPE-ed over, or not?

What can the Secretary of State tell us about her response to the warnings about auditor conflicts of interest? She mentioned audit responsibility and potential failure in her statement. Auditing conflicts of interest have been repeatedly identified at Carillion, at BHS, in the banks and now at Thomas Cook. Has she read the excellent report from the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, and what is her response to its recommendations, including its calls for a new regulator and for the audit profession to be proactive rather than reactive? Why is the Secretary of State so resistant to change? The Competition and Markets Authority wants action; why does she not?

What action is the Secretary of State taking to address the scandalous payment of bonuses to executives who have profited at the expense of workers and customers and who presumably have direct responsibility for the appalling hardship to which she has referred? Analysis by Unite and Syndex shows that £188 million in bridging loans would have prevented the liquidation. That would have allowed profitable parts of the business to be sold while still trading, and for workers’ rights to be protected. This would have supported the wider economy and communities, too.

The Government should be a partner of business, not stand apart from it. That means intervening and providing support where intervention stands a chance of succeeding. The more evidence emerges about the Thomas Cook collapse, the more it appears that the case for intervention was there to be made. If they would not intervene at Thomas Cook, exactly when would the Government intervene?

If the Secretary of State wants to avoid hardship for those covered by insurance, she needs to change her approach and her attitude to intervention. When she referred to a drop in the ocean in responding to a question from the shadow Business Secretary, she demonstrated that she did not agree with her predecessor, who said that reforms were needed to ensure a strong level of consumer protection and value for money for the taxpayer. He was right, was he not?

The Secretary of State said that the Thomas Cook approach was unacceptable and that support must be given to those severely impacted by its closure through no fault of their own. I agree, but the Government have failed Thomas Cook. They sat back and let it fold. Only proper reforms will make sure that catastrophic failures of this type do not happen again.

**Andrea Leadson:** I am glad that the hon. Gentleman recognises the Government’s efforts, particularly on the repatriation of customers stranded overseas and, of course, in the work, which I know through chairing the Government taskforce, to try to ensure that we get the best possible arrangements for Thomas Cook staff. He asks why the Government did not bail out Thomas Cook. He will be aware that, according to court reports, there was about £1.9 billion of debt on Thomas Cook’s balance sheet. It did approach Government looking for a loan facility of up to £250 million, but it is clear that, had the Government put that significant sum of taxpayers’ money into Thomas Cook, we would have ended up in the same position as we are in today. We would have had to repatriate those customers. We would have to have done exactly as we have done, but the taxpayer would have been £250 million worse off, so it was not an appropriate use of taxpayers’ money. It is very sad that Thomas Cook went bust, but it is not right that Government should just bail out every business. Businesses need to stand on their own two feet.

The hon. Gentleman made some very important points about regulation. I can tell him that I wrote to the Financial Reporting Council asking it to prioritise as a matter of urgency consideration of an investigation into the audit of Thomas Cook’s 2018 accounts, as well as the conduct of its directors. He asked why the Government did not foresee this.

It was never envisaged that a UK tour operator would fail to insure itself fully to cover claims for personal accident or fail to ensure that it had ring fenced the funds to meet those liabilities so that they were safe if the company got into difficulty. The company has a legal obligation to cover personal injury claims arising from package holidays abroad, and that is why I have asked the official receiver to investigate, in particular, this aspect of the conduct of Thomas Cook’s directors.

**Barry Gardiner (Brent North) (Lab): Who were the auditors?**

**Andrea Leadson:** The hon. Gentleman asks from a sedentary position who the auditors were. They were EY, and they will be investigated by the official receiver.

The hon. Member for Sefton Central (Bill Esterson) asked how the Insolvency Service supported Thomas Cook employees. It has received over 8,000 claims for unpaid liabilities from former employees and has paid out over £41 million so far to claimants for arrears in pay, compensatory notice pay, holiday pay accrued, holiday pay not taken, notice worked not paid and redundancy pay. The Insolvency Service continues to work to offer, for example, the services of BUPA’s employee assistance programme and the Centre for Crisis Psychology to Thomas Cook employees as a particular request that came from the taskforce. The Government continue to do everything possible to support those affected and we are delighted that Hays has taken over the shops, providing jobs for well over 2,000 of those who lost their jobs under Thomas Cook.

Finally, I am very keen on the BEIS Committee’s report into audit. As I made clear when I appeared before it, I will bring forward fundamental changes to audit. I expect that to be in the first quarter of next year. I am very interested to read its report and, as I also made clear, I want to see Donald Brydon’s report, which I believe he expects to provide to Government by the end of this year.

**Dr Julian Lewis (New Forest East) (Con): Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. May I congratulate you on your own gallant and good-humoured campaign to be Speaker?**
I must congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on being so proactive in responding to this shocking discovery that Thomas Cook did not properly insure so many people against injury while being on a Thomas Cook holiday. Am I right in thinking that there would have been no way in which this would have come out but for the collapse of the company? If it turns out to be the case that the company was not breaking any existing rules, regulations or laws by behaving in this totally irresponsible and inhumane way, will it be possible to make a change in the law to ensure that this can never happen again?

Andrea Leadsom: I am grateful to my hon. Friend for his recognition of the fact that it felt important to raise this before the House prior to Dissolution. He is absolutely right. In doing so, we seek to provide some sort of reassurance to those who have been profoundly impacted by accidents and illnesses overseas on Thomas Cook holidays. He asked whether there could have been any legitimate expectation that this might have happened. That is not the case. It was never anticipated that a business such as Thomas Cook would not have adequately provided for such claims that were known to them. I am putting on notice today that any future Government—I am sure that the Opposition spokesman has made similar a commitment—will wish to resolve this to ensure that it cannot happen again. BEIS officials will work over the next few weeks to bring forward proposals on how to ensure that this cannot be repeated.

Christine Jardine (Edinburgh West) (LD): I share the Secretary of State’s surprise and horror that Thomas Cook was operating without the necessary insurance. Many of my constituents and, indeed, I myself travelled with Thomas Cook unknowingly. We all assume that the safeguards that we see with travel companies through the Association of British Travel Agents and so on ensure that we are travelling safely and that we are protected. Will the Secretary of State assure us that there will be safeguards to ensure not just that we investigate what went wrong at Thomas Cook, but that all travel companies, or anyone offering travel in this country, is properly insured?

Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Lady gives me the opportunity to say this again: I call on all similar travel and tour operators to ensure that they covered this and that they have not got a similar arrangement to the one that Thomas Cook had. I can assure her that BEIS officials during the next few weeks will bring forward proposals for ensuring that this does not happen again.

Kate Green (Stretford and Urmston) (Lab): It is great pleasure to see you in the Chair, Madam Deputy Speaker.

What the Secretary of State has told us this afternoon is shocking. Can she assure the House that there will be no similar shocks in relation to Thomas Cook’s public liability and employer liability insurance?

Andrea Leadsom: There are certain types of public liability and employers’ liability that are required to be insured by law, and there is no expectation that any business would not have provided that kind of insurance. Officials are looking carefully to satisfy themselves, as they do as a routine matter, but I say again in this particular instance, it was a great surprise and shock to see that there was an attempt at self-insurance with no proper provision made for these types of claims.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. I have had several people in my office absolutely devastated because the hard-earned holiday that they had saved for has been cancelled. They are asking me when they will have their money back. They have to wait months, by which time their holiday options will have changed. Could the Secretary of State outline what she believes to be the absolute time limit for refunds for holidays and how that will be achieved?

Andrea Leadsom: It has been a difficult time for all those affected whether they were customers on holiday, customers who had paid for a holiday but not yet taken it, or employees and those in the supply chain. The Government have sought to tackle all those issues as far as we are able to do so. The hon. Gentleman will be aware that the ATOL scheme is designed to provide refunds and repatriation costs that arise from a failure of a company such as Thomas Cook. Many of those who have suffered financial loss will be able to claim through ATOL or, indeed, through a credit card provider if their holiday has not yet been taken.

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her personal energy, commitment and skill in chairing the Government taskforce on the collapse of Thomas Cook. I agree with both Front-Bench spokespeople that the directors did not comport themselves well before, during or after the collapse. With 2.8 million passengers taken out of the equation at Manchester airport, with the huge repatriation event, and with employees still employed on temporary contracts trying to close the company, will she join me in thanking the workers who remain after losing their jobs and the trade union reps at Unite and the Transport Salaried Staffs Association, who have worked so hard to represent them so ably?

Andrea Leadsom: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his contribution to the taskforce and join him in thanking all those who have played their part. People from right across Government, from trade unions and from local enterprise partnerships and so on have all sought to find new work. The Department for Work and Pensions rapid action taskforce has been helping people write CVs, and there has been mental health support and so on. It is a great shame and a huge pity to see this long-standing brand collapse, but I am sure we are all glad that its name will survive perhaps as an online travel company. I join the hon. Gentleman in wishing our very best to all those who lost their jobs in finding new work in a similar sector.

Jeff Smith (Manchester, Withington) (Lab): I thank the Secretary of State for her statement. This is clearly a combination of shocking system failure and a failure by the company, but I am unclear whether the Secretary of State thinks that the law has been broken here. If it turns out that the law has been broken by executives, who may well have been taking large bonuses at the time, will she reassure us that the Government will be seeking some redress?
Andrea Leadsom: The hon. Gentleman raises an important point. I have written to the Official Receiver today asking him to take carefully into account in his review the behaviour of directors in the run-up to the insolvency of Thomas Cook and to consider whether this further appearance of failure on their part should require further action with regard to his statutory duties. This will be thoroughly investigated, and if there is wrongdoing, the Official Receiver has the ability to claw back bonuses and, of course, to take further steps through the Insolvency Act 1986.

Points of Order

1.43 pm

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is a great pleasure to see you in the Chair. My point of order, which I gave notice of to the Speaker’s Office, relates to the written statement on shale gas that the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy put out yesterday. It said a lot about the past but very little about the immediate future. The Government were forced to introduce a so-called moratorium on fracking at the weekend because of the tremors that affected my constituents in Blackpool in August, with the Oil and Gas Authority subsequently saying that they were unacceptable.

However, in a Radio 4 interview and in that statement, the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy has rather hedged her bets, undermining that promise. The Government have not provided any response to the National Audit Office report that talked about the real problems of decommissioning, which should be taking place at Cuadrilla’s site on Preston New Road as we speak. Madam Deputy Speaker, have you received any information about whether the Government are going to answer those big questions? The Secretary of State is in the Chamber, so she may like to respond now.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): I thank the hon. Gentleman for his point of order. He will be well aware that the making of a written statement is perfectly in order, so I cannot give him answers to his questions, but he has taken the opportunity to alert the House and the Treasury Bench to his concerns. Of course, there are other ways in which he would normally be able to take forward his inquiries, but I do appreciate that this is the last day on which he can do so. He has done his best.

Barbara Keeley (Worsley and Eccles South) (Lab): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. Ministers have been in the media today talking about the issue of the 2,250 autistic people and people with learning disabilities detained in mental health in-patient units. In the press and on broadcast media, Ministers have talked about demanding reviews of all those people who were detained, but in today’s written statement on the training of staff working with autistic people and people with learning disabilities there is no mention of what Ministers talked about in the media. We have therefore not had the chance to question Ministers on it, nor have we had a chance to talk about the report of the Joint Committee on Human Rights.

Last week, the Committee described the horrific reality of hospital in-patient units, with its report stating that “we are inflicting terrible suffering on those detained in mental health hospitals and causing anguish to their distraught families.” I have raised the case of Bethany, an 18-year-old autistic woman who was locked in a cell in a secure unit in Wales many miles from her home. This morning, her father said the following in response to the Care Minister, talking about those reviews of the 2,250 people like Bethany—

Madam Deputy Speaker: Order. Is the hon. Lady almost finished? This is a very long point of order.
Barbara Keeley: I have almost finished.

Madam Deputy Speaker: Given the sensitive nature of the hon. Lady’s point of order, I will allow her to finish it, but let us not create a precedent.

Barbara Keeley: Thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker. The Care Minister has been around the media but has not been here to talk about the reviews, and Bethany’s father said the following in response:

“We have had review after review after review. We need action, not reviews.”

In the light of the extensive coverage in the press and broadcast media, have you had an indication from Health Ministers that they plan to come to the House to make an oral statement and answer questions?

Madam Deputy Speaker: The straight answer to the hon. Lady’s eventual question is that I have had no such notice, but I get the impression that what the hon. Lady really wanted to do is to raise this matter in the Chamber to bring it to the attention of Ministers. We are about to have a general debate during which any Member can raise a wide range of points, so the solution for the hon. Lady is immediately available to her—as soon as we are finished with the Bill that we are about to discuss.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): Further to the point of order from my hon. Friend the Member for Blackpool South (Gordon Marsden), Madam Deputy Speaker. Perhaps through your good offices, I can ask the Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, who is still here, about not only the fracking planning applications for which we have worked very hard. The Care Minister has been around the media but has not reviews."

Madam Deputy Speaker: The hon. Gentleman is not really making a point of order, and he really ought to come back and make that point during the debate.

Barbara Keeley: I am enormously grateful for the priority the Secretary of State has given to this issue. He has shown real compassion for the.
victims of historical institutional abuse. In his opening remarks, he rightly mentioned the long inquiry held by Judge Hart, who did an enormous amount to give a voice to the victims of historical institutional abuse.

May I encourage the Secretary of State, after this Bill receives Royal Assent later today, to ensure that a copy of the Act and a copy of today’s Hansard are sent to Judge Hart’s widow? It is a great sadness to us all, and particularly to his family and to the victims who met him, that he did not live long enough to see this day. It would be a fitting tribute to have the Act and a copy of Hansard sent to his widow.

Julian Smith: The hon. Lady makes a very positive and sensible suggestion, and I am happy to do that. We spoke to Lady Hart last night, and Sir Anthony was, I think, perplexed by the slowness of us all to get this done. I will follow up as the hon. Lady suggests.

The draft legislation was subject to a 16-week consultation process in Northern Ireland, and the Bill was drafted by the Northern Ireland civil service at the request of, and based on a consensus reached by, all six of the main Northern Ireland political parties.

The inquiry’s report was published in January 2017, the same month as the collapse of the Executive, so the Executive never considered the report and it was not laid before the Northern Ireland Assembly. That is why, in July, the Government committed to introducing legislation by the end of the year, if the Executive were not restored, and it is why this was one of the first Bills in the Queen’s Speech.

This is the first Bill of its kind in the United Kingdom, with the results of inquiries in England and Wales and in Scotland yet to be completed. I hope this Bill will give some comfort and hope to victims of child abuse across our country.

Following the election announcement a week ago, there has been significant worry and concern from victims about how the Bill might progress. I thank the Prime Minister and Government business managers for facilitating the Bill today, and I thank Opposition business managers and Opposition spokesmen and women for coming to agreement and for working with us to ensure this Bill passes through both Houses before the election.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson (Lagan Valley) (DUP): It is the true mark of the House that, when it comes to dealing with the most vulnerable in our society—those who suffered for a long time and who have waited a long time for justice—this House rises to the occasion. That sets an example we might send back home to Northern Ireland in calling for all the political parties to come together, to get back to Stormont and to get back to working on behalf of all the people of Northern Ireland.

Julian Smith: I could not agree more.

I thank my colleague Lord Duncan of Springbank, Lord Hain and other noble lords and baronesses for their work in the other place last week. Many Members in the Chamber today have played a role in making today’s debate happen, particularly DUP Members, the hon. Member for North Down (Lady Hermon), the Chairman and members of the Northern Ireland Affairs Committee and many, many more.

The desire and push from Northern Ireland has been significant. On Sunday night, a number of members of the Government received a letter from a Catholic priest who represents the diocese of Down and Connor, which was the location of two of the children’s homes at the centre of the inquiry. He said that it is “a matter of deep personal shame for me and for the Diocese that both homes were found by the Inquiry to have fundamentally failed the children in their care, enabling regimes of horrific and systemic emotional, physical and sexual abuse of children, as well as neglect. In the period before the Inquiry, I came to know some of the former residents of these homes and publicly supported them in their calls for justice and an Inquiry. Over the years of the Inquiry and since, I have watched as those who led this campaign and the hundreds of former children in care who took part in the Inquiry relived the horrors of their time in these institutions and the abuse they suffered there. As children, they arrived at these homes frightened, disorientated and with the simple hope of every child that the adults in their lives would respond to them with affection, understanding, tenderness and care. Instead, they were met so often with hard-hearted coldness, harsh regimes of sterile adult routine and lovelessness, as well as indescribable sexual and physical abuse. It is difficult to overstate the suffering that the former residents of these homes have endured and continue to endure as a result of their experience.”

On the final day of one of the most divided Parliaments in British political history, we can say, hand on heart, that we have all come together, worked together and pulled together to deliver this Bill.

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): It would be wrong if we did not pay tribute to the Secretary of State and his efforts to deliver this Bill. This has not been easy to achieve, and I know all the work done behind the scenes by my right hon. Friend the Member for Belfast North (Nigel Dodds), my party’s leader in Westminster, and by my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson), our Chief Whip, and others to cajole and get this over the line. It is a fitting tribute to the Secretary of State, on this last day of Parliament, that the Bill will come into law. On behalf of the victims, their groups and people like Marty, Margaret and Gerry who contact us regularly, I thank the Secretary of State.

Julian Smith: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his kind remarks. He was at his most tenacious over the weekend in trying to make this happen.

There are many more people to thank. Unfortunately, Sir Anthony Hart, who led the inquiry, passed away earlier this year, but through his widow, Lady Mary Hart, I thank him and his team for their tireless work. I thank the other inquiry members, the Public Record Office of Northern Ireland, the Northern Ireland civil service, Northern Ireland Office civil servants, the Executive Office, the leaders of the Northern Ireland political parties and my predecessors, my right hon. Friends the Members for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) and for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire). They have all played an important part in getting to today.

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that sometimes in this House there is a feeling that Northern Ireland gets neglected or is a sideshow, but this measure today shows that the Government and Opposition knew that this was a hugely important issue to the people of Northern Ireland and that getting it to the House today and through this procedure is a mark of this House’s responsibility and care for Northern Ireland?
Julian Smith: The hon. Lady is right on that. I hope that if we can get this through this afternoon, we will be able to toast success for not only the Bill and the victims, but Northern Ireland itself.

This legislation will provide the necessary legal framework to deliver two of the key recommendations from the historical institutional abuse report. The first is a historical institutional abuse redress board, to administer a publicly funded compensation scheme for victims in Northern Ireland. This will be a multidisciplinary panel of one judicial member and two health and social care professionals. There are estimated to be more than 5,000 people who could apply for redress. No matter what country they live in, I urge all victims and survivors to apply: whether you are part of a victims group or whether you have lived with their abuse silently for years, please make use of this redress scheme in this Bill.

Gavin Robinson (Belfast East) (DUP): The Secretary of State is right to indicate just how important that progress is today. In outlining the steps that victims will take—those from my constituency in Kincora boys’ home, and others from right across Northern Ireland and beyond—and in asking them to apply without delay, will he give us some sense of the timescales associated with the process? When we get Royal Assent for this legislation, how quickly will the panel be established and be in place not only to receive but to consider those applications for redress?

Julian Smith: I will come on shortly to deal with that question. The second part of this Bill creates a statutory commissioner for survivors of institutional childhood abuse for Northern Ireland, who will act as an advocate for victims and survivors and support them in applying to the redress board. Whether in fighting for support services or in ensuring that payments are made as quickly and as fully as possible, the commissioner will play a key role in delivering for victims.

Jim Shannon: It is important not only that we have the commissioner in place, but that the moneys available for compensation will range from £10,000 to £80,000. I wish to make the point about the De La Salle Brothers and what happened in my constituency at Rubane House, outside Kircubbin, where institutional abuse, both physical and sexual, against some young boys took place over a period. Those young people are adults now but they are traumatised. How will the trauma, and the physical and emotional effect it has upon them, be taken into consideration whenever they apply to the commissioner for help?

Julian Smith: I hope that one of the commissioner’s focuses will be to look at the services to support those who come forward. That will require money and organisation, but it will be a key part of the role for whoever takes on the position of commissioner.

I have just been asked about this, so let me say that one of the key concerns of parliamentarians and victims’ groups alike is the swift payment for victims and survivors after the passing of this legislation. Victims have already waited too long for redress, and as we have heard, many have died doing so. Our thoughts are with their families. Clause 14 contains provisions that allow the redress board to pay an initial acknowledgement payment of £10,000 to eligible victims before the full determination of the total compensation is payable. Clause 7 allows the redress board to take a flexible case-management approach to claims to ensure that those who are elderly or in severe ill health are considered as a priority. Those in greatest need of redress will get their payment more quickly. Clause 6 allows claims to be made on behalf of a deceased person by their spouse or children.

Other key aspects of the Bill that are important to victims and survivors include provisions that allow the redress board to convene oral hearings, but in a way that should not create an unnecessary delay for those cases in which oral evidence is not required; the ability of the redress board to determine the rate of compensation based on a number of factors, including the duration of stay in an institution; and the ability of the commissioner for survivors of institutional child abuse for Northern Ireland to make representations to any person, including to the redress board. I also wish to confirm to the House that my Department is working closely with the Northern Ireland civil service and David Sterling to ensure that there is adequate resource and capacity for this redress scheme, so that it can get going as urgently as possible.

Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): I am pleased to hear about the possibility of streamlining this process. Is there any indication that any of these payments will be made within this current financial year, irrespective of the bureaucracy of the hearings that have to take place? I am talking about the interim payment of the £10,000.

Julian Smith: We have begun a project management team between the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland civil service. I know that David Sterling and the Executive Office have spent time this week looking at how things can be accelerated, but I wish both to acknowledge the need to move quickly and to recognise the fact that this will take a bit of time. We need to get this legislation through, and then we need to get on with how we can press forward with this.

I want to pay tribute to the victims groups that I have engaged with over these past few months and that have engaged with my predecessors and other political leaders: Survivors North West, Survivors Together, the Rosetta Trust, and SAVIA—Survivors and Victims of Institutional Abuse. They have campaigned on behalf of the people they represent with strength and dignity. Many victims are old and ill. They have not only had their childhood and lives blighted, but they have had to wait, year after year, for the child abuse and what happened to them to be recognised.

At each meeting with the victims groups at Stormont House, I noticed that Jon McCourt from Survivors North West had a small battered copy of the Hart report laid on the table in front of him. There was huge hope and trust in that copy of the report that there might finally be acknowledgement of what he and his friends had had done to them as children. Jon has held that copy of the report close, gripping it tightly for three long years, meeting politician after politician, civil servant after civil servant—anyone who could make a difference in getting redress. The battered cover of Jon’s report, once blue, has now faded. That report contains the grimmest details of the twisted blows laid on the hope and innocence of the children taken into care in Northern Ireland at different times over much of the 20th century.
It details how the Kincora hostel in Belfast was completely captured by three child abusers for the same number of decades, leaving them free to anally rape and masturbate at will those boys they were meant to protect.

“The report details the impact of the child migrant scheme to Australia. Witness HIA 324 describes his experiences in his statement, as follows:

“My life in institutions has had a profound impact on me. I have always wondered what it would be like to have had a family—a mother and father and brothers and sisters. I never got the chance to find out because I was sent to Australia. We were exported to Australia like little baby convicts. It is hard to understand why they did it... I still cannot get over the fact that I was taken away from a family I never got the chance to know. I was treated like an object, taken from one place to another... I have a nightmare every night of my life. I relive my past and am happy when daylight comes.”

HIA 324 was born in 1938 and was 75 when he spoke those words to the inquiries team in Perth in 2013, but he died before he could sign his statement.

The Hart report highlights how the congregations that supported the four Sisters of Nazareth homes were well aware of the physical and emotional abuse happening in those homes, but did nothing to stop it. The report details how the Sisters of Nazareth would regularly conceal or ignore the presence of the sisters or brothers of those children in their care, hiding them from them. The report details the assault of girls in Nazareth House, with one case in which a girl had her head banged against white tiles for not washing properly. She recalled that there was blood all over the white tiles, and she suffered hearing problems afterwards.

The report details how the Norbertine Order, and then diocese after diocese, failed to stop Father Smyth, a known abuser, from travelling the length and breadth of Northern Ireland and Ireland, abusing hundreds of children. The report confirmed that at Rubane House, boys were sexually abused throughout the four decades that the home operated. It was not just sexual abuse: page after page of the report details the bullying, the use of Jeyes fluid and the confidence attacks on menstruating girls and on young children who wet their beds. The report outlines failure after failure by statutory authorities and the Government to ask the right questions, to show basic levels of care, or to follow up on the condition of those children sent thousands of miles away to Australia.

The Bill, which we hope to pass today, cannot undo the acts perpetrated on the victims, and it does not extend to the other areas of the UK that are currently being addressed by the child abuse inquiry here in London and a similar inquiry in Scotland, but it will show to Northern Ireland victims that action has been taken, and I hope that in a short time similar action can be taken, through legislation, for the rest of the UK.

I started off by thanking the number of colleagues who have helped to get this Bill delivered today, those who have worked on the Hart report and those who have worked to support this legislation, but this is not our Bill; it is the Bill of the victims and survivors, and of their representatives, some of whom are present today. For anyone involved at whatever stage, it has been a humbling experience to work with Northern Ireland victims and survivors who suffered child abuse while in care. The resilience and humanity of the victims should drive us all in our daily responsibility to every child, whether through our families, our work, our responsibilities or our communities.

Victims were let down not just by the perpetrators and institutions, but by the Churches, councils and Governments who were meant to look after them—standing by, ignoring, not checking, turning a blind eye. People knew at the time. The De La Salle Order set down guidelines for the physical layout of its buildings to ensure that behaviour could be observed at all times—for example, on how windows should be placed in doors to ensure clear sight of what was going on in rooms:

“The Brother Director shall be careful that the parlour doors have glazed panels without curtains in such a manner that the interior may be easily seen.”

The ultimate legacy of the Northern Ireland victims and all child abuse victims, from the Hart report and from the Bill, must be for us all to ensure that we do everything within our power to protect children.

“When I was a child, I spoke as a child, I understood as a child, I thought as a child; but when I became a man, I put away childish things.”

Child abuse victims never had their full childhood and were then held hostage by the experiences that they had throughout their lives. I hope that the Bill goes some way towards providing Northern Ireland victims with redress, and for other victims throughout our country, I hope that their time for redress will come very soon. I commend the Bill to the House.

2.14 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): I have to say that this is not an easy day to be in the House—it is not an easy time to hear the Secretary of State’s words—and I pay wholehearted tribute to him for quite simply one of the most powerful speeches I have ever heard in my 22 years on these Benches. He spoke from the heart and he spoke from a deep humanity. We have to pay tribute to him for those words, which were extraordinary and remarkable. Please God, may they provide a grain of comfort to some people who have suffered for so long.

It is also appropriate that we mention Sir Anthony Hart, who did an extraordinary amount of work. We must pay credit to him. I also pay credit to the Secretary of State’s predecessor, the right hon. Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley), who is present. She dedicated a huge amount of energy to this issue, as did her team and the Secretary of State’s team. I also pay credit to the Northern Ireland Office and the Northern Ireland civil service for the amount of work that has been done. How painful and agonising it must have been for them to have had to work in these circumstances. For me, to read the words is almost unimaginable, yet those to whom they refer are suffering a hundred times more than any of us could ever be.

As the Secretary of State said, the First Minister and Deputy First Minister agreed the terms of reference back on 31 May 2012; however, the inquiry goes back nearly 100 years, to 1922. Who can even begin to imagine the cavalcade of agony that has passed in those 100 years? Who can imagine those children whose bodies were broken, but whose hearts and spirits were also broken—who suffered in a way that, please God, we will never, ever have to contemplate again? When the Secretary of State quoted from St Paul’s letter to the Corinthians, it made me think about what the victims thought as children. What did those children think of the adult world—the place of safety that they were being
taken to? What did those children think? As adults, did they have any trust, faith or belief in the base humanity, having faced that?

Today, we are undertaking a unique piece of legislation. There has never been a Bill like this on the Floor of the House—it has never happened in this way before. It is absolutely right and appropriate that we take extraordinary, unusual steps, because this is such an extraordinary occasion. We must place on record, here and now, our determination that this will never, ever happen again. Every one of us, be we lay, be religious, be we politicians—whomsoever we be, anyone of us who has any contact with children's services must make absolutely sure and swear in our heart of hearts that we will never, ever walk by on the other side of the road. We should never, ever be those people who turned a blind eye, as we heard in the agonising statement from the priest that was read out earlier.

We cannot make it right—we cannot repair those broken hearts and broken bodies—but by doing what we will today, by offering some form of redress, some form of compensation, we will hopefully allow closure. We will hopefully be able to say that this House has heard. The right hon. Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson) spoke magnificently earlier about the way the House has risen. When we think of some of the activities that take place in this House, today’s statement shows in sharp relief some of the things that happen here that are less noble—that are often ignoble. Today, the House has risen to a higher standard. It is entirely appropriate that is on this occasion that we have risen.

There are many questions still to be asked. This is still a draining emotional occasion. We should pay tribute, once and for all, to the right hon. Secretary of State for the footwork he has shown. It is unheard of for legislation to come through in this way. As recently as last week, we heard that the Whips Office would not allow it and it was not going to happen, yet somehow, with the involvement of the Government, the Opposition, officials, civil servants and even the palace, the Bill has come to the House and will go through.

Let us thank Brendan McAllister, the interim advocate, for the work that he has done. Let us follow up on some of the interventions that have been made already by right hon. and hon. Members representing Northern Ireland parties, and let us take the opportunity to say that this is one of the rare occasions when the House comes together, regardless of our party and of any form of religious, political or social affiliation. We are as one in this House in swearing that this cannot happen again, this must not happen again and the victims must get redress, must get compensation, must get respect and, please God, must get closure on this.

The behaviour of politicians of all parties and of all communities in Northern Ireland has been exemplary. I know how difficult it is. I have met victims groups, as has the Secretary of State. To sit in a room opposite someone describing the most appalling nightmare—a nightmare that is hard for any human being to envisage—is an experience that none of us came into politics to undergo, yet it is right that we came into politics to resolve this horror and this agony. I cannot say enough about how impressed I was by the victims groups that I met. Their courage and bravery is astounding. I hope—I know—that all Members in this House feel the same way and say with one voice how much respect we have for them.

I hope that some of the technical questions that were asked earlier by right hon. and hon. Members from Northern Ireland can be addressed. The question of the speed of the recompense payments is, of course, an issue to be resolved. It would be marvellous if some indication could be given to the victims before Christmas—it would be wonderful if they at least had some idea about what was happening. In addition, we would like to know when the staff will be in place for the redress board. It is important to say that we have to establish the bureaucracy, if it has not already been established.

I noticed that no additional resources were allocated in the recent Budget. Does that mean that they will actually come within the next financial year? Following the question from the hon. Member for South Antrim (Paul Girvan), will they come from this year’s budget, or will there be some additional funding mechanism? Those are technical questions. In some ways, they are almost otiose in the context of what we have heard today. Technical questions, compensation and redress are important, but the single most important thing that we in this House do today is to pay credit and tribute to the victims, to their families and to their relatives, and to say that politics in the past may have let them down, but today, politics and this House will not let them down. We will respect them, we will cherish them and we will do everything—everything—we can to ensure that they finally receive the redress that they so deserve.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): Order.

It is very sad that the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) is leaving the House after today. I think that everyone present will agree with me that his last speech in this Chamber will be remembered as one of his best.

2.22 pm

Karen Bradley (Staffordshire Moorlands) (Con): May I say, Madam Deputy Speaker, what a privilege it is to have you in the Chair for this debate? I know that you have such humanity and that you will be touched by this debate and all that you have heard. I know, too, that you will be pleased that you were chairing this particular debate.

I also thank my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State for his incredibly moving and powerful speech. I congratulate him on our being here today. I also join you, Madam Deputy Speaker, and everyone in this House in saying that the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) made one of his finest speeches. It is his last speech, which is a great shame to so many of us, who know just how he has worked for his constituents, for the people of Northern Ireland as a shadow Minister, and also for this House, because he is a true parliamentarian and will be desperately missed.

We stand here today just before we go into an election. We are going into an election because politics is broken, yet here we can prove that it is not broken. Here, we can prove that we can come together and do something. We can deliver something that is right for people who have been through the most agonising, dreadful experiences—
experiences that no person, and particularly no child, should ever suffer. We have a chance to make that right today. I trust and know that we will come together, that we will pass this Bill and do so by this evening, that this Bill will have Royal Assent, and then we can get on with delivering redress for those victims. They need it, they deserve it, and it needs to happen as soon as possible.

One of the privileges of the job that I used to do, that my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State does now, and that my right hon. Friend the Member for Old Bexley and Sidcup (James Brokenshire) and others have done, is to realise that, very often, we are in the presence of people who have suffered the most incredible, dreadful experiences. Northern Ireland is like no other part of the United Kingdom for having put people through experiences that no one should ever have to go through. I, as Secretary of State, spent time listening to people who had been through horrendous experiences in the troubles and who had been treated in a way that nobody should be treated, and listening to people who were victims of historical institutional abuse. As Secretary of State, or any Minister in the Northern Ireland Office, one cannot fail to be touched by that and to be determined to make it possible to help those victims. I was absolutely determined that we should do that, and I am so proud that we have got here today, but it had to be done in a way that was sustainable and robust. Neither I nor my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State could just wave a magic wand and make it all right. We have to go through the proper processes, because we must make sure that this redress scheme and the measures that are put in place will be robust, will not be challenged and will be delivered—and delivered as quickly as possible for the victims.

That is why it was a matter of the most enormous regret that the Hart report was delivered at the point that the Executive collapsed. Had the Executive not collapsed, we would have had ministerial direction to know what Ministers thought of the recommendations. We would have had something to work with. In fact, had the Executive been there, they could have delivered interim payments without the need for primary legislation. They could have had the scheme up and running so much sooner, but they were unable to do so, which is why we had to go through a long consultation process that victims felt was delaying matters and making them worse. It was not doing so; it was there to give a robust legal framework so that we could deliver this scheme.

I want to pay tribute, as my right hon. Friend did, to the six parties. Earlier this year, when we were starting on a talks process, we got all the parties from Northern Ireland in one room and used that opportunity to get them to talk about this matter, so that we could have a united position from them. Although we may still not have an Executive, it will be those politicians and those parties that will have to administer this scheme as Ministers. Therefore, it was absolutely right that it was they who helped to draft this legislation. If that had not been done, and we had used the normal primary legislation route in this place, it would have taken far, far longer, which would have meant that victims had to wait longer.

I have to say to the parties in Northern Ireland that this really needs to be a wake-up call. Yes, we are putting this Bill through here today—I know the hurdles that my right hon. Friend has had to go over and how he has had to jump over obstacles and everything else to get this Bill here today. I know full well what he has come up against, trying to get matters such as this through the collective responsibility of Government, but he should not have had to do that, because there are politicians in Northern Ireland who are elected to do this work. This needs to be the wake-up call. They should put their differences aside. I know that they want to go back into Government and do the right thing by the people of Northern Ireland. This is their opportunity. Please, I say to them, do the right thing for those people.

Finally, I just want to talk about the victims, many of whom I can see today. I know that we should not refer to those in the Gallery, but I will, because those victims are there. I had the honour and privilege of meeting them. I sat through meetings in which they told me about their experiences. There is nothing more humbling than listening to people telling you what they have been through—especially when it is something that they should never have had to go through. This is a Bill for them. This is something that we are delivering in this broken Parliament for people for whom we should be standing up. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State on this Bill and I will wholeheartedly support it here today.

Mr Gregory Campbell (East Londonderry) (DUP): The victims are very grateful for and conscious of the Bill’s progress today, and we hope that it will proceed apace. In addition, though, some have said to me that they are appreciative of and grateful for the empathy, sympathy and solidarity with them from across the community, as well as the concrete steps being taken today. Does my hon. Friend agree?
Emma Little Pengelly: I absolutely agree with all that my hon. Friend has said.

I am so glad that this legislation for the victims and survivors of abuse is one of the last things that this House will have achieved in this Parliament. This is a Parliament that has been dominated by a small number of big issues, and we know very well what those are; I am not even going to say the word. Yet I know that Members from every single party right across this House and the elected representatives in Northern Ireland get into politics because they want to make change on these types of issues. They want to make changes on education, health and public services, and to address great wrongs and injustices. It is such a good thing that we are ending this Parliament on such an issue, and that the many hundreds and thousands of people who suffered appalling abuse, as the Secretary of State outlined, will finally get the last piece of this process: redress. But redress will not be closure. It will never undo the dreadful wrongs that happened to all those children in those settings.

Karen Bradley: The hon. Lady was instrumental in setting up the inquiry from the beginning. Let me make a point to her that always struck me when I was in the Home Office dealing with these matters for England and Wales, which is that to call this historical abuse is absolutely wrong. It is not historical; it is current and present. It is with the victims every single day.

Emma Little Pengelly: Absolutely. I was involved in this process right from the start, seven years ago. I pay tribute to the right hon. Peter Robinson and the late Martin McGuinness, because I was present at the meeting when the victims and survivors came in and told us of the terrible, terrible experiences they went through, and both those men were genuinely moved. Who could not be moved by hearing those personal experiences and the terrible wrongs? But both of those men were very moved, and they worked together, and tasked me and some others to go away and try to drive this work forward. Throughout those seven years, civil servants at all levels, the late Judge Hart and all those who gave support and help were really motivated to get through the process and to do so swiftly, because they had heard the terrible things that had happened and had seen the injustice that they wanted to address.

I have to say that I am angry that it has taken this long to get to this point of redress. The inquiry was unusual in that the timeframe was put down in legislation. The late Judge Hart made it absolutely clear that, yes, he would request the extension that he was allowed by the legislation, but he would also meet the timeframes set out, so we always knew when the inquiry was going to report, because he made that clear. I and others made representations to those who pulled down the Assembly; asking them not to do so in order to allow the report to come forward, and I am genuinely angry that it happened. I am angry that we have had to wait for those years for the victims and survivors to get the redress they deserve and that we knew was coming.

But today is not a day about recriminations. In fact, this has been a good example of how the political parties can work together and the difference that they can make—not, perhaps, on the bigger issues that will always be challenging, but on these types of significant issues that are so meaningful to people’s lives.

I pay tribute to all the victims and survivors, who have been on this journey right from the start, including Margaret, Kate, Gerry and Jon McCourt, all of whom have been mentioned in this debate. They have done incredible work because they have represented not just themselves, but the many thousands of victims across Northern Ireland—in fact, across the world—who perhaps could not step forward. They were brave enough to do so, no matter how difficult it was, and it must have been incredibly difficult for them to tell their own stories again and again and again to try to get the inquiry and the justice they deserved.

I have been involved in this process for seven years, so it is really good to see it come to an end today, but the victims and survivors have been involved for decades and decades before that. As I have said in the House many times, many of these children came from very challenging and difficult circumstances, and what they needed was love, protection and support. But when we read the report and listen to their experiences, we know that what they got was cruelty, depravity and harshness. That is appalling. Right from that very first meeting with Martin McGuinness and Peter Robinson, those who were in the room were absolutely struck that the right thing to do was to try to get justice for the victims. There is very broad consensus on that in every political party and right across this House.

I pay tribute to all the victims and survivors. This is not the end of their journey. They will continue with all the pain and suffering—the legacy of what happened to them. I hope that this redress and financial support—and what it symbolises—will be of some comfort, as well as a recognition of their hard and incredible work to stand up and address the terrible, terrible wrong that was done to them and many thousands of other children.

2.38 pm

Sir Peter Bottomley (Worthing West) (Con): It would be a good idea for others to look at the last two pages of the historical institutional abuse inquiry report, which is available at hiainquiry.org. In those pages, Sir Anthony Hart—to whom tributes have properly been paid—set out the six points that he thought were the most important. It is now two years after he had hoped that the compensation payments would be made. Let us also remember the survivors who were over the age of 18—people who he was not able to look at. I think there is unfinished business in this part of our kingdom. We have to remember that there will be further reports on the rest of the United Kingdom to come in time.

2.39 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): When the Secretary of State made his poignant remarks to the House today, he quoted from Corinthians on the views and perspective of a child—what children see. The beginning of that chapter says that faith is so powerful that it can move mountains, but without charity, compassion and love, it is nothing. This House today, through the actions of this Government that have been brought here, has demonstrated that through compassion it has been able to move bureaucratic mountains. It has been able to move those things that stood in the way, and it is not as nothing: today this House is something. It has done something incredibly powerful and incredibly important for victims across Northern Ireland, those here on the
mainland, and, indeed, those who are located across the world as a result of the abuse that took place in these locations in Northern Ireland.

It is important that the Secretary of State is able to set out, and this legislation sets out, the schedule of when moneys will be paid, because that is a practical issue. It is also important that we make sure that help is given to the victims groups going forward from now on, because they have been brought to the top of the mountain. Today is, if I can use the word appropriately, an exciting day in that they have now achieved this, but there will then be the cliff edge of what happens next. Those victims groups will have to be wrapped in compassion, charity, help and assistance so that they can then move to the next phase of this, because it is not going to end very quickly. There will probably now be a process put in place, and it is important that practical help is given to take the groups through that to make sure that they can get the other end of this as quickly and expeditiously as possible. I hope that we will see that. I hope that we mark this very poignant and historic day with an appropriate mark of respect and an appropriate celebration that this House is not as nothing; it has achieved something today.

2.41 pm

Julian Smith: With the leave of the House, Madam Deputy Speaker, I just want to come back on a few points that I was asked about. Before I do, may I thank my ministerial colleagues in the Northern Ireland Office? No Secretary of State could ask for better colleagues than the two on either side of me at the Dispatch Box today, who have also played an incredible part in trying to move this Bill forward.

The hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) raised the issue of the financing of the scheme and the timetable. As I mentioned in my opening remarks, officials in the Executive Office are already working on the implementation programme. They aim to make shadow board appointments to work on policies, procedures and standards so that the board can start considering claims as soon as practicable after it is officially launched. Officials in the Executive Office are also working hard to ensure that the consideration of claims can begin as soon as practicable after the Bill becomes law, and exploring the possibility of opening up applications in advance of the establishment of the board. Obviously, we will all want to do whatever we can. In particular, the Government will do whatever we can to make sure that we play our part in moving things forward as quickly as possible.

The funding for the scheme comes from the block grant, but clearly we will be making sure that we do everything we can to support the Executive Office.

Gavin Robinson: On the points about process, the Secretary of State is injecting a bit of positivity and we hope that this will progress quickly. On 6 December, he is mandated to lay reports under the Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018. Given that we are going to have to do that process anyhow, could a line on progress updates and the processes that follow be inserted in the Bill?

Julian Smith: I will do whatever I can, within the constraints of the purdah period, to update right hon. and hon. Members and the public.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Staffordshire Moorlands (Karen Bradley) referred to the fact that this legislation is the most robust basis for the redress scheme and the commissioner. That is worth reiterating. It would not be on as sound a footing if we had not got what we hoped to get today, so she is absolutely right. She is also right to point to the fact that hopefully after the election we can get the Executive and the Assembly going, because that is the best place to do all NI legislation.

The hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) was very clear about how productive the Northern Ireland Assembly and the Executive had been around the time of the Hart report, and on other issues. That period gives us all hope that we will get back to a position where we will restore the Executive and the Assembly.

My hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) made an extremely valid point. It is something I was worrying about last night as I re-read parts of the report. There are many, many people of different ages—people who may not have been in care but may have been abused in other settings—who will no doubt be the subject of reports going forward.

I thank all colleagues for all their kind remarks, and again pay tribute to the victims groups who are sitting here today. They may have missed their current flights, but we have arranged for them to be able to go later. I hope we will all be able to celebrate with them shortly.

Question put and agreed to.

Bill accordingly read a Second time.

Motion made and Question put forthwith (Standing Order No. 63(2), That the Bill be committed to a Committee of the whole House.—(Maggie Throup.)

Bill considered in Committee.

[ Dame Rosie Winterton in the Chair ]

Clauses 1 to 34 ordered to stand part of the Bill.

Schedules 1 and 2 agreed to.

The Deputy Speaker resumed the Chair.

Bill reported, without amendment.

Third Reading

2.48 pm

Julian Smith: I beg to move, That the Bill be now read the Third time.

That was, I think, one of the shortest Committee stages in this Parliament's history. Having been Government Chief Whip, I only wish that another policy area of this Government could have been covered so quickly.

As has been said during the course of this debate, in powerful speeches from Members across the House, this is a day for victims—the victims from Northern Ireland who are in the Public Gallery today, the victims from Northern Ireland who are sitting at home, and all victims of child abuse who have yet to have redress and a full acknowledgment of what they went through. I am extremely grateful to the House for all the support and for all the civil service support, and I think this is a very fitting way to finish this Parliament.
2.49 pm

Tony Lloyd (Rochdale) (Lab): Let me join the Secretary of State in applauding the fact that the House has seen fit to move the Bill so swiftly through the House today. I want to place on record our thanks to my colleague Lord Hain and Lord Duncan, the Minister involved, because they were instrumental in ensuring that this House had the opportunity to move things forward.

I want to say to those with us today who are victims, representing many other victims, that this Bill would have been necessary had there only been one victim of this kind of abuse. We know that many thousands suffered—thousands more than will come under the ambit of the scheme, because many of them have already died, and we cannot offer anything by way of recognition or compensation to those people. But today we are saying to those who are with us that we recognise what took place, and it is a matter of real and profound shame to every one of us in this country. It is also a matter of anger, and we should use that anger to ensure that we are determined to do everything we can to insist that this cannot be the pattern for the future. We know that sexual abuse will take place in Northern Ireland and in the whole of the United Kingdom. This should impel us to do everything we can to protect our young people and those who are victims, because we have to learn the lessons of the past.

That is the triumph for those who have been through this campaign. They have campaigned for themselves and those they represent, but they have also campaigned on a much wider basis—they have campaigned for decency and justice for people across this land of ours. The real emotion that was rightly expressed by the Secretary of State, by my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) and by others is not just about empathy. It is because we profoundly believe in the need to ensure that there is justice for those who have campaigned and those they campaigned for and, in the end, to set a different moral tone around this issue for the future. This is a good Bill, and I thank all our colleagues for making it possible to pass it today.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): The Secretary of State referred to the fact that the Bill went through Committee very quickly; I do not think I have ever chaired such a quick Committee. That indicates the unity in the House around this Bill, and I know that if it were not for the special circumstances we are in, many more Members would have wanted to be here to show their support.

Question agreed to.

Bill accordingly read the Third time and passed.

BUSINESS OF THE HOUSE

Ordered,

That, at this day’s sitting, the Speaker shall not adjourn the House until he has reported the Royal Assent to any Act agreed upon by both Houses.—(Maggie Throup.)

Valedictory Debate

Motion made, and Question proposed.

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming Dissolution.—(Maggie Throup.)

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Sir Patrick McLoughlin.

2.54 pm

Sir Patrick McLoughlin (Derbyshire Dales) (Con): Thank you for calling me to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker. This is the last time that you will be able to call me. It was a great privilege working with you when we were doing opposite jobs, as Chief Whip and Opposition Chief Whip.

I first saw inside the House of Commons in about 1972. In 1970, Cannock elected a Conservative Member of Parliament, Patrick Cormack, with one of the biggest swings in the country in that general election. Like any new Member of Parliament, he went round the local schools and invited us to come down to the House of Commons to have a tour. I came down in about 1972, and I remember it well. I was overwhelmed by the atmosphere, the beauty of the place and the history of the building—so much so that I remember saying to one of my best friends at the time, John Beresford, “I’ve decided what I want to do in life.” He said, “What’s that, Patrick?” and I said, “I want to come back to the House of Commons as a Member of Parliament.” I will always remember him saying to me, “If I was you, I’d keep that a secret.” It was not the kind of place that a comprehensive schoolboy from Cannock would end up.

Leaving school at 16, I became involved in the youth wing of the Conservative party, and I fought my first general election in Wolverhampton South East in 1983. It was a great campaign but an unsuccessful one, when the Conservative party overall was doing incredibly well. I made several unsuccessful attempts at winning other seats, and I began to think that my friend John was right. But as we all know in politics, things happen suddenly. All of a sudden, a by-election was called in West Derbyshire, and I was selected as the candidate, when Matthew Parris, who has been a lifelong friend since then, decided to pursue a career in TV.

I would like to pay tribute to the officers of the West Derbyshire Conservative association in those days, particularly Geoffrey Roberts, who is sadly no longer with us, but his wife Josie still lives in Bakewell. They took a bit of a gamble in 1986, selecting a 28-year-old who was hardly a typical Tory—somebody who left school at 16, had not been to university and had gone through 12 months of a coal strike. With our successful campaign in that by-election, and with my charm and personality, I managed to take a very safe Conservative seat with a majority of 15,500 to one with a majority of 100 votes.

I came into the House of Commons on 13 May. My mother came down, and my pregnant wife was with me, and we were invited to have tea with the then Prime Minister, Mrs Thatcher. My mother was not overwhelmed at all by meeting Mrs Thatcher. She had never met a senior politician of any description. We met her in the Prime Minister’s office here in the House of Commons,
and within a few minutes, it was almost as if I did not exist. My mother and Mrs Thatcher were talking away like two old fishwives. After 30 minutes, a note came in for the Prime Minister saying that she had to go to her next meeting. She looked at my mother and said, “I’m very sorry, but I have to go to my next meeting.” I will always remember my mother tapping her on the knee and saying, “Yes, my dear, you are busy, aren’t you?” to which Mrs Thatcher said, “Well, I am today. It’s just one of those days.”

That is how I came to represent one of the most beautiful constituencies in England. It is a constituency dominated, to a great degree, by the Peak District national park. The Peak district is within an hour’s drive of 60% of the UK population, and some weekends it feels like they all come. The Peak District national park is a very important part of our country. Obviously it has strict planning rules and regulations, but I want to see people living in the national park and not priced out of it. We must bear that in mind.

We have a number of important market towns in Derbyshire Dales, not least Wirksworth, Ashbourne, Bakewell and Matlock. They are thriving market towns, but at the moment their high streets are under tremendous pressure. I do hope that the new Government will think very carefully about how they can support our market towns and our high streets—that is incredibly important—and avoid putting extra unnecessary costs on them, or if costs are put on business, make sure they are across the board, including for the internet companies, which at the moment do not quite share their full burden.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): It has been a privilege and a pleasure to serve in this House with my right hon. Friend, but will he give the House a pledge that he will not write his memoirs, or if he changes his mind and does decide to write his memoirs, that he will make no reference at all to what happens in the Whips Office? Does he agree with me that whipping, like stripping, is best done in private?

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I agree partly with what my right hon. Friend says. If he does not mind, I shall say something in a few moments about the Whips Office and about the party system, about the Whips Office and about the party system, and perhaps, as far as my party is concerned, long-suffering Whips. When David Cameron became leader of the Conservative party in 2005, he made me the Opposition Chief Whip, and then he made me the Chief Whip in the coalition Government in 2010. There, I was really ably assisted by John Randall, who is now in the other place, as my Deputy Chief Whip—really a man of great and outstanding ability and high principle—and by the right Member for Orkney and Shetland (Mr Carmichael). I see in his place the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who was also in the Whips Office.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I am very grateful to the right hon. Gentleman in any capacity in this place, but I found myself doing so and I found myself enjoying it and respecting his leadership, so I thank him for that.

Justine Greening (Putney) (Ind): In my experience, I always saw the Whips Office as a human resources department, but with the “human” bit taken out.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: Well, everybody is allowed to have their views. All I can say to my right hon. Friend is that she ought to have to deal with some of the people the Whips Office has to deal with.

I would like to say something to all people who come into this House of Commons. Whatever they think about the Whips Office and about the party system, very few people would get into this House on their own ability; they get here only because they belong to a major political party or a political party, and I think that is sometimes forgotten by them when they get here.
the reshuffle, so I had time to reflect on it. It was a big step to move from the back office of politics to the front office, or to the frontline, as it so often seemed, particularly in those first few weeks at the Department for Transport, where I had of course started as a junior Minister some time before.

I remember very well, Madam Deputy Speaker, you coming to me on that Monday afternoon, when I knew what was going to happen to me, and you told me that the Opposition day debate on Wednesday was going to be on rail fares. I did try to say to you that I did not think this was a very good idea and could you not find a different subject to take on. The next morning you realised why I might have suggested that, but as usual you stuck to your guns, and I found myself responding to such a debate that week.

I found my four years at the Department for Transport one of the most fascinating periods that I spent in government, and it was a huge privilege to be the Secretary of State and head of a major Department such as that.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op): I would just like to put on record that during the right hon. Gentleman’s spell as Secretary of State for Transport, a company—it will be unnamed—came to me in desperate straits over a problem that involved the Department for Transport and other countries, and it would have gone out of business within 10 days had it not been resolved. I took it to the right hon. Gentleman, we had a discussion, he did what was necessary and that company was saved, with about 120 jobs, and I would just like that to go on the record.

Sir Patrick McLoughlin: I am very grateful to the hon. Gentleman. As I said, it was an incredibly rewarding period.

Within a few days or weeks of being there, I found myself having to phone Richard Branson to explain why his company was going to keep the franchise for the west coast main line, although he had previously been told that Virgin had lost it; that conversation I remember well. I would like to say at this point that it is fair to say that people such as Richard Branson and Brian Souter have done more for rail passengers in this country than many Secretaries of State, and they have improved our railways in a very dramatic way. I hope that, whatever plans come in the manifestos, we do not lose the involvement of the private sector in the railways. They have transformed our railways, and I think that is partly as a result of the private investment we have seen.

I would like to take this opportunity, if I may, to pay tribute to some of the superb civil servants who supported me in my role. Among them, in my private office were Mark Reach and Rupert Hetherington, as well as Philip Rutnam, who was the permanent secretary for all the time that I was there, while Phil West was my principal private secretary for the entire four years I was at the Department. I had excellent special advisers—another often misunderstood role—in Ben Mascall, Simon Burton and Tim Smith, as well as a constituent of mine, Julian Glover, who knew more about the railways than anybody I have come across and would give me the history and everything else. He has written and had published not so long ago a book on Thomas Telford, “Man of Iron”, and it is great authoritative writing. People like them who bring outside expertise straight into the political arena are really very important.

I was encouraged by the unswerving support of the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Exchequer at the time, who were both great infrastructure enthusiasts—so much so that one of my problems as Transport Secretary was that, when visiting a construction site, I was always third in line to get a hi-vis jacket and a hard hat. In 2015 I was reappointed by the Prime Minister. I remember him saying, “Patrick, you’ve been going up and down the country promising all these schemes.” I pointed out that I had only done so after he had promised them in the first place, and that it would have been difficult to row back on promises made by the Prime Minister.

Talking about infrastructure, one of the fascinating aspects of returning to the Department where I began my ministerial career was that I could appreciate fully just how long and difficult these major projects are. Crossrail is a good example. When I was first in the Department, in 1989, I remember the then Secretary of State saying, “We’re going to build Crossrail.” It is now being built. It has been delayed and gone over budget, but it will make a tremendous difference to London once it is finished.

That brings me to High Speed 2. HS2 is not about speed; it is about capacity. It is about building a modern railway that is fit for our times and for a modern country, I could spend a long time talking about HS2, but I think that might try the patience of my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Sir David Lidington), which I do not want to do. I accept the problems that he and his constituents face as a result of HS2, and those concerns must be listened to. However, I will find it ironic if I can take a high-speed train from London to Brussels or Paris, but not to Birmingham, Manchester or Leeds. It is absolutely essential that we increase our capacity.

As we prepare to leave the European Union, I well recall the Cabinet meeting on the Saturday morning after David Cameron had returned from the negotiations—given that he has written about this in his book, I can now break the rule not to speak about Cabinet discussions. I said in that meeting, “I would love to live in Utopia, but the trouble is that I would wake up and find that the EU was still there.” We have to be realistic about what we want from Europe. We are leaving the European Union, and it is right that we do so—we said that we would be bound by the result of the referendum, and I strongly believe that—but it is the European Union that we are leaving, not Europe. We must make sure that we get a good trading relationship with the rest of Europe as quickly as possible.

I will still be living in Derbyshire Dales. I shall miss tremendously being its Member of Parliament and being at the centre of things there. I am sure that I will still enjoy the company of so many good people, but it will be a different relationship. After 33 years, it is time to move on.

One of my greatest supporters and helpers has been my wife. It is fair to say that she has always been my strongest supporter in public—in private, she has often told me the truth, and I have been the better for it. I first entered the House in a by-election, and it was chaotic; after six weeks of campaigning, I arrived here in the thick of it. I decided only last week not to seek re-election,
and I have to say that my departure feels the same. One of the best pieces of advice that my wife ever gave me was when she was helping me with a speech that I was preparing. After typing it up, she looked at me and said, “Patrick, I’ve never known you to make too short a speech.” On that note, I want to end by thanking everyone, including all the officers and staff, for their help.

3.14 pm

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab): I rise to make my final contribution after more than 36 years in this House. As I said when I announced that I was standing down, it has been the honour of my life to represent Rother Valley, a constituency that I first moved to at the age of eight, when my father, a Durham miner, moved to the south Yorkshire coalfields.

Having been elected in 1983, my baptism came very shortly after, when 4,500 miners went on strike for 12 months. With the Orgreave coke works in my constituency, I was kept on my toes. That was followed by three years as the Parliamentary Private Secretary to the then Leader of the Opposition. I learned quite a lot of things that I will not be sharing this afternoon—I am not even tempted to talk about the Whips Office, as the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) has just done.

The major work that I have done in the House is with Select Committees. When I was first elected, I served on the Energy Committee, and then for a short time, I was a member of the Environment Committee. I chaired the Health Committee for five years, from 2005 to 2010. One of the earliest things that Committee did was to secure a free vote in the House on bringing in a comprehensive ban on smoking in public places. Some people said at the time that it would be the end of the world as we knew it, but now people say that it is the most popular piece of public health legislation that the House has ever introduced. I spent eight years chairing the Committee on Standards, until September last year. We did not have quite as great a result as we did in 2005. We smoking ban, but my intention all along was to ensure that this place was better thought of by the people outside who elect and send us here. I think that to some extent we were moving along quite nicely on that, until something happened in 2016 that seems to have knocked us back quite a bit. Select Committee work is something that I have enjoyed.

With regard to local achievements, clearly there are many, but the main achievement that I and my staff have had over many years is dealing with individual casework, for the people who come along and need help, perhaps because they have been unable to communicate their concerns. I have always said that I have been a voice for the voiceless in Rother Valley, speaking up on their behalf. Another thing I have been involved with in the constituency is coalfield regeneration. The advanced manufacturing park is now in the Rotherham constituency, and my voice and that of the Government were there for that on many occasions.

Finally, I want to say a few words of thanks to some individuals. For the last eight general elections, my friend and colleague Alan Goy has been my political agent. All Members will know how important it is to have a good relationship with their political agent. I also want to thank the staff who have supported me during my tenure. I will thank, in particular, my current staff, Shenna Woolley, Jacqui Falvey and Natalie Robinson, who support me in the constituency, and Kate Edwards and Michael Denoual, who work here in Parliament.

As the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales said, your wife is a massive support in this job. Sadly, I lost my first wife Carol in 2008, but Andree, who I married a few years ago, has been a pillar of support. It would be difficult for anybody to do this job without that type of support at home.

I do not want to turn this into a full-scale Oscars speech, so I will end by thanking the people of Rother Valley, who I have been honoured to represent. Whoever wins the seat at the election, I hope that they will feel the same satisfaction representing it that I have felt for many years.

3.19 pm

Mr Edward Vaizey (Wantage) (Con): I am grateful to have an opportunity to take part in this debate and to pay tribute to so many colleagues who are moving on. It is a particular honour to follow my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin). Indeed, it was a telephone call from him that first heralded my appointment as a Minister. I could hear the deep reluctance in his voice, verging on disbelief, as he announced that the Prime Minister had appointed me. He then had a moment of fun at my expense when he told me—he obviously knew me very well—that I was off to the Ministry of Agriculture, before revealing that I was in fact going to the Department for Culture, Media and Sport. In fact, things went from bad to worse after that phone call, because my sole contribution, apart from irritating the Chief Whip during my first five years in this place while on the Opposition Benches, was to write a blog in which, with the oncoming age of austerity, I recommended that the first thing we should do as a Government was to get rid of Government cars. Straight after my right hon. Friend put down the phone, my new private secretary at the Department for Culture, Media and Sport rang me—I felt tremendously important—and said, “Minister, would you like to come into the Department?” I said that, yes, of course I would. They said, “Minister, shall we send your car?” I paused for a moment. I thought of myself, as I have always been in this place, as a man of great principle and then said, “Yes, please send a car.” /Laughter. Two minutes later, there was another phone call: “Minister, the Secretary of State has read your blog and he has cancelled your car.” I never had a car for the six years that I was in the Department.

My right hon. Friend’s speech also reminded me of my own glittering political career in this place. I have always wanted to do the Queen’s Speech address, so that I can recount to the House some of my great political successes. Standing in 1997 in Bristol East, I managed to turn a 5,000 Labour majority into a 17,000 Labour majority. Then, when I was selected to succeed Robert Jackson in the seat of Wantage, he and I worked hand in glove together for three years—father and son, Laurel
and Hardy—with never a moment apart. After working with me for those three years, Robert Jackson turned around and defected to the Labour party.

I was lucky enough to succeed Robert Jackson in 2005 to become the Member of Parliament for Wantage and Didcot, and it is a tremendous privilege. I rechristened the constituency Wantage and Didcot, although I can never get that past the Boundary Commission. Didcot is the largest town in the constituency, which also includes Wantage, Faringdon and Wallingford. I sensed from my right hon. Friend’s speech that all of us in this House believe that we represent the best constituency in the country. The great advantage of Wantage is that it literally does have everything, from an ancient white horse to a 21st century space cluster with 90 start-up companies. It has Europe’s leading business park, Milton Park, a technology business park with life sciences, the European Space Agency, the Satellite Applications Catapult, Williams Formula 1, farming, small businesses and a huge sense of community. I think the one thing we all learn in this place as Members of Parliament, if we did not learn it beforehand, is the tremendous power of community and social organisations in our constituencies. Again and again, we know the tremendous amount of work that volunteers do in every part of society in our constituencies to make things happen and to make them work, often with very little thanks or recognition.

My constituency—I hope this does not sound arrogant or come out in the wrong way—suffers in different ways from other constituencies, in that it suffers from the problems of success. The issues that come across my desk relate to economic success: concern about the growing number of houses and whether there is adequate infrastructure, such as roads and schools, to support it. There are other important issues, such as reopening a provincial railway station, Grove station, to provide better commuting for all my constituents, and sorting out the problems at Wantage community hospital. The biggest issue that faces us is how to cope with the impact of economic success in this area.

I just want to touch on two other topics before I sit down. I probably should not bring up Brexit—we were all having such a lovely time before I did—but I just want to put on record, as someone who has got into a bit of trouble on this issue, what happened. I supported the Prime Minister’s position when he first became Prime Minister, to leave with a deal; otherwise we would leave with no deal. Funnily enough, I thought the no-deal threat was better aimed at this Parliament, rather than at Europe. It was only the out-of-the-blue Prorogation that made me feel that Parliament should have a moment where it put in an insurance policy to ensure that we did get a deal, but once a deal came back I was very happy to support it. I was happy to support the programme motion, and I hope that if the Prime Minister comes back with a majority, he brings the deal back and Rams it through. I would certainly support him in that. I am not a Remainer or a Remainor; I am a leaver-with-a-dealer. I hope that that is what can happen after the election.

Although I lost the Whip, I am a fan and an admirer of the Prime Minister. I have known him for many years. Generally, every single political prediction I make is wrong, but I did predict two years ago that he would become Prime Minister. I also said that, looking at his record as Mayor of London, he would make a fine Prime Minister. I think he will. As I look at my right hon. Friend the Member for Rutland and Melton (Sir Alan Duncan), I can see him nodding in agreement.

Sir Alan Duncan: Indeed I am—wholeheartedly.

Mr Vaizey: The final issue I want to raise in my speech is that, despite the then Chief Whip’s concerns, I was lucky enough to serve for six years as Minister with responsibility for the arts, telecommunications and technology. The telecoms part of the brief was a complete accident. It came to us when we were in opposition, because the then telecoms spokesman was my right hon. and learned Friend the Member for Rushcliffe (Mr Clarke). When it was pointed out that he did not even own a mobile phone, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt) rather deftly stole the policy and took it over to DCMS. When I got that Department, the then Prime Minister had such faith in me that he tried to take the telecoms brief away from me and give it to my hon. Friend the Member for Weston-super-Mare (John Penrose). Thankfully, he was married to a woman who was the chief executive of a telecoms company at the time, so I held on to that fantastic brief, as well as that of the creative industries of film, television, advertising and video games. I just want to say two things about those two areas.

First, the arts are tremendously important. We have the most incredible arts ecology. That is a terrible word to use for such a beautiful subject, but we have the most incredible museums and arts institutions in this country. I think it really is only in this place that they are not appreciated. When I go abroad, people marvel at our museums and how we support the arts in this country. If only we could have a system similar to the system we have for international development, where the arts have a guaranteed budget—not 0.7%, but bigger than it is at the moment—we would get so much more from them. We already get such a tremendous amount.

On the creative industries, we perhaps like to mock luvvies but that is completely wrong. One of the reasons we have not dipped into recession in the past couple of quarters is the contribution made by the British film industry. I told the then Prime Minister that he had as much right to appear on the set of James Bond as at a widget factory, because it was making a massive economic contribution to our country.

On technology, we are the leaders of Europe in technology investment, start-ups and technology companies. As we move towards delivering Brexit, I urge all policy makers in this House, when Parliament returns, to look at technology as one of the key areas that will drive the 21st century post-European Union British economy.

3.28 pm

Kate Hoey (Vauxhall) (Lab): When I see the right hon. Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey), I always recall my right hon. Friend the Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) talking about seeing him in his nappies when he was young. Seeing again how young he obviously is, I am very sorry that he is leaving the House. One thing we have in common is the arts. A lot of Members spend
Mr Vaizey: I should just say that I have not said I am leaving the House—I was just giving a statement at the end of term.

Kate Hoey: I am sure that the right hon. Gentleman knows that he has to be re-elected, of course, but he is not retiring. [Interruption.] Now I am very unclear whether he is retiring or just putting himself forward for re-election—fine.

Like the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin), who spoke first in the debate, I came in at a by-election in 1989. I will not go through my whole history, but I just point out that it is very different being a Member of Parliament who is literally five minutes away from their constituency. He was my constituent in Kennington for a very long time and he took a great interest in many of the community events; I am very grateful for that. Coming in as a new Member in that by-election back in 1989 was very different: we had no television covering the house, no mobile phones, no emails, no 24-hour news—it all sounds wonderful now. Members who come in now probably do not really understand how different it was 30 years ago.

Some of the improvements have been wonderful. For example, I waited for an office for a very long time. All the things that are now done for new Members did not happen then and we were very much left to find our own way. I should also say that I do not like some of the changes. I am very pleased that we have a new Speaker who will be extremely fair and show the kindness—quite honestly, I am not a hypocrite—that the previous Speaker did not show to Members, and I hope that the new Parliament will realise that some changes from the so-called modernisation do not necessarily change the standard of the debate in this place or the way that people behave. I think we need to look at that very carefully, and I hope that the new Speaker will do so. There is not just the question of clapping. Practically every tradition in this House has been introduced over the years for a reason. I remember being one of those people who came in and immediately said, “Why are we wasting so much time in the Division Lobbies? Why are we not getting through right away? Why are we not able to not vote in a different way?” However, I would not dream of voting to get rid of the Division Lobbies now, because it is such a useful time to talk to people from both sides of the House—if someone is not always voting with their party, as I have not been a few times—and to see Members from our own party. I spent most evenings going over to Vauxhall to community meetings, friends groups and tenants associations, so I did not have the luxury of being able to stay around in the House for lots of nice meals, with the wonderful catering staff and wonderful food. We need to be careful about modernising this place so much that it is treated in a way that loses the absolute value of history that we have in this place.

One part of my life that will be very unhappy about me leaving is my wonderful, old, traditional, original Mini, because it literally knows its way from the House of Commons over Westminster bridge and back over Lambeth bridge. Some days I would do the journey perhaps two or three times, so my Mini will get a great rest when I leave, and it will not know what has hit it now that it will not be doing that journey.

I want to say a couple of very important thank yous. This place is made up of people who work so hard for us all and who very often do not get the thanks and tributes. I thank all the members of Royal Mail, for example—the postmen and women who have delivered our mail and have been so kind over the years. I thank Yiannis in the Travel Office, who has been fantastic. Most importantly for me, as someone who came in and was not in any way computer-savvy—I still do not really like technology—one person in the Digital Service, Balj Rai, has been just wonderful. He knows exactly how to be patient with someone like me, and I thank him.

Finally, I want to thank my personal staff. I have had Kathy Duffy working for me for 26 years—I must not get emotional; this is silly. I have had Max Freedman for 15 years; Lara Nicholson for 11 years; Ada During for six years; and my wonderful paralegal Ashleah Skinner, who has done a brilliant job, for four years. They have all made my life here so much better. I also thank all my constituents who have sent me such wonderful letters and shown kindness. I will not miss many of my party political activists, but I will miss my constituents, my community organisers and the people who really wanted to work with me to make Vauxhall a better place. One thing I said when I came in here was that my country would always come before my party—and it still does.
That period had a rather unusual ending. The day after the 2015 election, around lunchtime, I was called by David Cameron and reappointed as Secretary of State for Defence. As I was leaving the Cabinet table, he said the Secretary of State for Industry had handed in his resignation and the permanent secretary wanted somebody to be in charge for a couple of days while the rest of the Cabinet was assembled, so for a few hours I was Secretary of State for Industry. As I was picking up my papers, he added, “The Secretary of State for Energy has also handed in his resignation”, so I said, “Fine, I’ll have a look at that as well”. Then, as I was leaving, he said, “And the Secretary of State for Scotland has resigned”. So for a day or two I held those four portfolios together.

I then had the most enormous privilege of all: working with our servicemen and women at the Ministry of Defence for three and a half years, leading them in the campaign against Daesh, resisting the challenge of a resurgent Russia and playing an important role in NATO. There can be no greater privilege than serving in that Department with the many willing and brave servicemen and women who have committed themselves to the service of our country. I want to put on the record my thanks to them all.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I would just like to thank my right hon. Friend for all he did in that role, particularly the way he kept Members of Parliament on both sides of the House so well briefed. When the history books are written, they will show how seriously he—together with his colleagues in the armed forces and his ministerial colleagues—took that incredibly important role. I thank him for that.

Sir Michael Fallon: I am most grateful to my hon. Friend. It seemed to me incredibly important to keep the confidence of the House, having won its support back in 2015 for airstrikes in Iraq and then for their extension to Syria. Of course, that we were able to keep that confidence was down in no small part to the precision of our pilots and their skill in difficult conditions in minimising civilian casualties.

My successor will inherit a thriving and prosperous constituency. My constituents enjoy a good quality of life, remarkably low unemployment, a wide choice of schooling, frequent rail connections to the capital and the protection of the green belt—over 90% of my constituency is green belt—but there is still work to be done, including on the regeneration of Swanley, one of the other towns in my constituency, especially through new investment and the promise of a fast link service from Maidstone and Otford through Swanley to the city of London.

We also need to ensure that boys in my constituency have access to grammar school places. Whether you like it or not, Kent offers an 11-plus system, but Sevenoaks was the only district in Kent that did not have any grammar school places. I was delighted that after a 15-year campaign we managed to establish a girls’ school annexe, which has been open now for a couple of years, but we still need to ensure provision for boys’ grammar school places alongside it. We also need to continue to preserve our green-belt protections in Sevenoaks. The Government’s unrealistic housing targets will put pressure on that green belt, though I know that my hon. Friends on the Front Bench are conscious of the need to balance the demand for new housing with our commitments to protect the green belt.

I hope that this election campaign will not ignore some of the longer-term challenges our country faces. We have spent an awful lot of time—perhaps rightly, perhaps wrongly—debating the withdrawal agreement. In the end, that agreement only dealt with Ireland, our payments into the EU budget and the rights of EU citizens; we have not started yet on the major negotiation that really matters for business and jobs in my constituency, which is our future trading relationship, and I fear we have not yet started to explain to our electors some of the trade-offs that will inevitably be involved as we come to deal with the challenge to agriculture, financial services, the aerospace and automotive industries and our fisheries, and accommodating their legitimate right and desire to trade freely with the European continent with the views of our partners.

We will have to quickly put in place the security partnership that has long been promised in various documents the Government have issued—I fear we have spoken far too little about this—and make sure there is no cliff edge at the end of January or February in the policing and judicial arrangements that our constituents expect and in the way our agencies work with other agencies across the European continent to deal with terrorism and organised crime. We will also need to work with our former partners in the EU to continue to uphold the rules-based international order. We do not debate foreign affairs nearly enough in this House. When I first entered Parliament, in the 1980s, we had much more regular debates on international affairs.

We are dealing with a resurgent Russia that is in breach of many international conventions, whether on nuclear arms, chemical weapons or the protection of sovereignty under the Helsinki accords. We are dealing with a very ambitious China that is flouting the law of the sea convention, which it has signed, and continues to steal—there is no other word for it—the world’s intellectual property. And we are dealing with a mercantilist United States that is degrading the World Trade Organisation and slapping sanctions even on its friends in pursuit of a policy of “America first”. When it comes to holding the rules-based international system together, there really is a role for the leadership among the western nations, and particularly for our own nation here in the United Kingdom.

Let me end by thanking all those who have helped me so much over the last 31 years, particularly the staff in my office.

The Minister of State, Northern Ireland Office (Mr Nick Hurd): I am not able to contribute with a speech, but—with some licence from you, Madam Deputy Speaker—I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend, for enabling me to intervene and express my strong personal view that he was one of the most effective and competent Ministers with whom it was ever my pleasure to serve. I think that that view is widely held on this side of the House.

Perhaps, through my right hon. Friend, I can express my personal thanks to the people whom I need to thank, not least my parliamentary staff, Jamie, Rosie, Ann Taggart and, in particular, Jill Brown, who is a
parliamentary institution of her own. She came into this place in 1974, with my dad, and continues to go the extra yard on behalf of constituents, and for that she will always have my gratitude. Again, I am very grateful to my right hon. Friend for letting me intervene.

Sir Michael Fallon: I am very grateful too, for the opportunity to allow my right hon. Friend to put that on record. I am only sorry that he cannot do so more formally.

Let me finally echo the thanks expressed by others to the Clerks and the staff of the House, and, in particular, single out the staff of the Library. They are, perhaps, a dignified part of our constitution, but they are almost certainly one of the most effective parts, and we owe them a very great deal.

Several hon. Members rose—

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I call Ann Clwyd.

3.46 pm

Ann Clwyd (Cynon Valley) (Lab): I wanted to allow others to go first, but thank you, Madam Deputy Speaker.

I was elected in the middle of a miners’ strike, in 1984, to the seat held at one time by Keir Hardie, the first leader of the Labour party. When he was the MP, it was called Merthyr and Aberdare, although people often leave out “Aberdare”. I am afraid it is quite likely that when the boundary commissioners get to work, my constituency will disappear altogether, but fortunately they have not got to work yet, and while there is still a Cynon Valley, I am very proud to have represented it from 1984 until today.

I am standing down at this election with a heavy heart, especially as there is so much that I would still like to do. I have a long shopping list, and I have not completed the shopping. I do hope that other people will carry on and shop on my behalf, because these are all issues for which I think we can all campaign.

One of the things that I am proud of is that when Tower colliery, in my constituency, was going to be shut by a previous Administration, I managed to sit down the pit for 27 hours. The Government of the day argued that the pit was uneconomic, but we kept it open for a further 10 years as a result of some of my efforts. The men who worked there, and the people in the community, were very pleased that that happened. I do not think that I have ever recovered after spending 27 hours down the pit.

When I was a journalist, before I became a politician, one of the things for which I campaigned was compensation for miners, and for those with pneumoconiosis in particular. I am very pleased that when Tony Blair came into government I was able to advance that cause far more; in fact, I reminded him every single week that miners’ compensation should be arranged much faster than it was, because miners were dying without getting the money. So I am very pleased we did that.

I was also concerned about coalfield regeneration, and one of the issues I am still concerned about is the reclamation of some land that was used for industrial purposes. The land in question covers 150 acres, and is a prime flatland at the bottom of a valley; there are not many valleys with so much flatland. On that site there was a Phurnacite plant that produced smokeless fuel, and when I was first elected it was one of the worst industrial polluters in the whole of Britain. We managed to get it shut down. Then there was a battle to get the toxic waste—tonnes and tonnes of it—taken away from the site and taken elsewhere. They wanted to bury it on site; I asked where else that was done and they said, “Nowhere,” and I said, “It’s not going to be done here.” So that toxic waste was taken away.

I am pleased that with the help of the present Secretary of State for Wales we are working on greening the site, because I was very pleased to be able to do that, and pleased that I have ever recovered after spending 27 hours down the pit.

When I lost my husband seven years ago I had arguments with the health authority in Wales—it is a continuing argument—and I am grateful that David Cameron had the foresight, if I may say so, to ask me to run an inquiry into complaints in the NHS in England. I would like to have done the same thing in Wales, because I was very pleased to be able to do that, and pleased that all our recommendations were accepted. More cross-party work on such issues, which we all care about and all want to see improved, would be valuable.

I speak Welsh—rwy’n siarad Cymraeg. I took my oath in Welsh and English, and I hope that one day it will be possible for Welsh to be a language used as a matter of daily life in this place as well. In the European Parliament, of which I was previously a Member, we managed to get substantial sums of money to assist the Welsh language there. I was very pleased that when I first got there in 1979 Barbara Castle was our first leader. You learned a few tricks from Barbara Castle. The first was that you got on with the other nationalities, if you could. Barbara never did, actually. I remember the leader of the German Socialists turning round to her one day and saying, “Barbara, you’re not in your national Parliament now.” That did not stop her. I do not think she ever got round to the idea of being in the EU, but I was pleased and proud to be there. I learned a lot of things, including how to vote electronically, which, after yesterday’s experience is perhaps something that will be sold to other Members. It certainly speeds things up.
There are other reasons why I was pleased that I went there first, before I came here. I have to say that it was a cultural shock for me to come here, because I had not realised how delusional people here were. I will tell you why. It was because we gave the impression that we did everything better than everybody else, when in fact there were many examples of other countries doing things better than we did, and I was pleased to have had the opportunity of experiencing that.

I was sacked by two party leaders—[Interruption.] Not for incompetence! First, I was sacked by Neil Kinnock for voting against the defence estimates. Then I was sacked by Tony Blair for going to Iraq at a particular time, which is particularly ironic. I then became the special envoy on human rights to Iraq. I have to say that I do not have quite the same fond memories of the Whips Office as some colleagues on the other side.

Sir William Cash (Stone) (Con): As the right hon. Lady knows, she and I came into Parliament on the same day—I think it was 3 May 1984—both in by-elections. I simply want to say what a pleasure it has been to be in the House with her all that time.

Ann Clwyd: Thank you very much. Yes, I remember our first few days here. If you come in in a by-election, it is always more difficult to assimilate. I am glad that my hon. Friend is still here. I have not always agreed with him, as he well knows, but I respect him for his diligence and persistence, because those are two things that a Member of Parliament needs to do: to be diligent and persistent, and not to give up.

One of the things I have been keen on is the promotion and protection of international human rights, and I have given my long-standing support to people in other countries, in the middle east, Turkey, Cambodia and East Timor. We always have arguments in this place about the arms trade, and I do hope that we are ultra-careful in future about who we sell arms to. One sadness for me is that we did not manage to get a report out in the last Session of Parliament on arms sales to Saudi Arabia. A sustained and strategic use of the parliamentary mandate and platform is therefore crucial to furthering causes and ensuring that the Government of the day are being properly scrutinised. Parliamentary questions and debates are important, and I found out that I have spoken in debates in the House 2,200 times. That is a useless fact, but somebody produced it today.

A friend of mine in the House of Lords, Baroness Quin, phoned me a short time ago. She was in the European Parliament with me, and she reminded me of various things. She and I were in Senegal for a women’s rights conference—I do not know how many years ago—and suddenly there was a phone call for Joyce Quin to say that Captain Kent Kirk had landed on the coastline of her constituency to protest about fishing rights. Joyce was getting phone calls all the time from her constituents, who had no idea she was in Senegal.

I have been committed to cross-party scrutiny through my long-term engagement with the International Development Committee, the Foreign Affairs Committee and the Committee on Arms Export Controls. I have also chaired the all-party parliamentary human rights group for many years, which has allowed me to work with colleagues from all over the world from across the political spectrum to raise awareness of serious human rights violations and breaches of international humanitarian law, as well as giving victims a voice and supporting them in getting reform and redress. Human rights is thereby depoliticised, as it should be. Some colleagues have also worked on the executive of the Joint Committee on Human Rights.

I have supported the work of the Inter-Parliamentary Union. We do not talk enough in this place about the IPU, particularly the British group, which enables me and fellow BGIPU members to communicate concerns, including human rights, when countries sometimes have to be called out. We build greater consensus on big issues and crises facing the world, such as climate change, international development, poverty alleviation and the refugee crisis. I pay tribute to the staff and secretariat of the IPU and highlight the work of its committee on the human rights of parliamentarians, which I have chaired several times and of which I was a long-time member. My vision for the Cynon Valley, the UK and my international community is unfinished business, a lot of it, as far as I am concerned.

Most of all, I thank people in the House for their friendship, comradeship and support. I mean all sections of the House, particularly the doorkeepers, because when I was hobbling around on my new knee, I had great assistance from them. In fact, I got quite to rely on them. They gave me every help and they still do, even when I say “No, I’m all right now, thank you. I can get to the back row now, so you do not need to help me any more.” Particularly to all my colleagues and friends, I want to say that this has been a great place for building friendships. I thank you all and I am very sorry to be leaving you all.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Rosie Winterton): I want to ensure that everybody gets a fair crack of the whip, so if colleagues could stick to about eight minutes, we can get everybody in and they would all have equal time.

4.3 pm

Justine Greening (Putney) (Ind): As long as nobody heckles me, I am sure I will absolutely be able to stay to time.

I want to start by saying a massive thank you to, first of all, my office team, who are up in the Gallery. They have done an absolutely incredible job for so many Members here over many, many years. I have to point out particularly the long-suffering Kate and Nikki. Without their assistance and support and that of the rest of the team that I have got with me today, I would never have been able to do any of the rest of the things that I have been able to achieve for my community in this place.

Other Members have explained what it was like for them when they first entered the House. For me in 2005, winning back Putney from the Labour party was quite big news, and I found myself in the middle of a media storm from minute one of my time as an MP.

Michael Howard came down the next day to, as I thought, congratulate the brilliant team at Putney Conservatives who had helped me with that amazing
victory. I stayed up all night organising his visit as the great leader, and he promptly turned up and resigned right by my side. Perhaps the best legacy from the few months that he had left in his role in 2005 was that he got back together a parliamentary party that had been in opposition for quite some time. He had us talk through different policy areas, and we discovered that, other than arguing about Europe, we had much more in common than that which divided us.

My time in this House has obviously been the greatest privilege of my life. I did not plan to be an MP, but I did it because I think people matter. I hope that I have always been a strong voice for people in Putney on the issues they care about, and I have simply sought to take their priorities and make them mine. My campaigning on Heathrow was perhaps an early indicator to the Whips and my party that I would stand my ground on their priorities and make them mine. My campaigning on Heathrow was perhaps an early indicator to the Whips and my party that I would stand my ground on their priorities and make them mine. My campaigning on Heathrow was perhaps an early indicator to the Whips and my party that I would stand my ground on their priorities and make them mine.

I want to reflect on the hugely important role that community groups and residents associations have played in my local community. Brilliant charities such as Regenerate, which works on the Alton estate in Roehampton, play an amazing role in inspiring young people to make more of their lives. There is the brilliant Putney Society—the ultimate residents association in Putney—and then, of course, there are incredible residents associations in Southfields, such as Southfields Grid, Southfields Triangle, and Sutherland Grove Conservation Area. All those organisations bring our community together and make it what it is, and I am so proud and delighted that I have been able to work with them for so many years.

I have had probably more roles than most in this House. I started my time in government in the Treasury team with the then MP for Tatton, George Osborne, carrying out an emergency Budget to ensure that this country’s finances did not go the way of Greece’s, and I have reflected on that as we have debated what a no-deal Brexit might mean for us. I quickly discovered as a Minister that I had the ability to make a difference way beyond even perhaps what people might have thought my brief was, so I got stuck into looking at the tolls on the Humber bridge, and I was delighted that I was able to get them reduced. I ended up with a beer temporarily named after me in that part of the country, and that meant a lot to me because I watched the Humber bridge open as I grew up. I was delighted to be able to make a change that meant that it can be a successful piece of infrastructure that joins two wonderful communities, rather than dividing them.

From there I moved on to the Department for Transport, where I had to make sure that transport enabled the 2012 Olympics and did not get in the way of them being the triumph they were. I worked with the then Mayor of London, who went on to do other things, including becoming Prime Minister. I am proud of that work, because hopefully we made the Olympics accessible to millions of people who did not have to worry about being suddenly stranded.

From there my journey took me to the Department for International Development, which often operates out of the sight of our country. I could not be more proud of the truly world-class team in the Department. We worked hand in hand with the Ministry of Defence on Ebola, and we did pioneering work to bring education to children caught up by the terrible crisis in Syria. We took a decision in DFID that we would do our level best to make sure those children grew up educated and able to read and write. So much of the Department’s work happens out of sight of the British public, but the British public should be rightly proud of that work, which stretches beyond that to girls’ education and responding to humanitarian emergencies such as Typhoon Haiyan in the Philippines. I am truly honoured to have had so much time in that Department.

After that, my final Cabinet role was perhaps my dream role: Secretary of State for Education and—perfect—Minister for Women and Equalities. I was the first LGBT woman in Cabinet and, of course, the first Secretary of State for Education to be educated at their local comprehensive school, and I am only too happy to have those two firsts and to have put something back into a school system that built me into being able to do anything with my life and to achieve what I have achieved.

It was brilliant to be able to work with the most inspiring teachers I could have ever hoped to meet. It is a fantastic profession, and I would say to anyone who is thinking about what to do to make a difference with their life that they should go into teaching, because that is where they can shape the future. It was a privilege to be able to work with people in that profession, and it is one of the reasons why I focused so much on their continued professional development.

**Tim Loughton (East Worthing and Shoreham) (Con):** I am very concerned and upset about my right hon. Friend’s departure, not least because somebody else will have to bring the jelly babies for us at Prime Minister’s Question Time. She has spoken at length about her extraordinary contribution to this House and to her community, but she has not yet mentioned one of her greatest legacies and interests, which I know she will continue outside this House, and that is her complete and utter obsession with social mobility. We all desperately want more to happen on that score in this country.

**Justine Greening:** My hon. Friend is quite right, and he brings me on to why I am here today as a Member who is departing the House. I have served my community and my country in Parliament for 14 years, but the mission that drives me more than any other is social mobility. It has characterised my life, and it is crucial to the future of our country and to making it a country in
which there is equality of opportunity so that everybody gets the chance, and indeed the right, to use their talents. Part of the solution to delivering that is in government and in Parliament, of course, but the other part of the solution is surely outside this place. Working with businesses and organisations is part of how we will get opportunities to more young people. Through the social mobility pledge, I will be continuing to work on social mobility and, indeed, scaling it up.

When I look to the horizon and where our country’s journey is going next, I recognise, understand and agree that this House will rightly remain obsessed with Brexit, but there will be a time after that. I want to make a constructive and positive contribution to social mobility, and I want to make sure that, when we get to that point, I am able to show that businesses are part of the solution for getting more opportunities to more young people. We must reflect on that and build on it further.

Mr Adrian Bailey (West Bromwich West) (Lab/Co-op):

I rise to give my final speech in the House. I stress that, notwithstanding the difficulties of the politics and the role of Parliament at this moment, my reasons for standing down are essentially personal. I have been here for 19 years, but it does not seem a minute since I gave my maiden speech. My enthusiasm for politics is undiminished and my commitment to the values that have always driven my political activity is still there. However, my birth certificate and the fact that last year I had to have a second hip replacement are timely reminders that we cannot always take it for granted that we want to do in life that, unfortunately, being here precludes us from doing. I have therefore made the decision to move on.

Before I talk about more general issues, I would like to express a few thanks, as other Members have done. First, I wish to thank my constituency and its electors for re-electing me six times. I am a strong pro-Europe remainner. My constituency voted 70% for Brexit, but their undiminished support for me is both a reflection of the broadness of the views they have on many things and perhaps a salutary warning to the Prime Minister on his election strategy. I have been privileged to represent a genuinely multicultural constituency, one that is heavily industrialised. Behind those often unprepossessing facades, there are small businesses that are at the cutting edge of our manufacturing technology and drive the revival in our civil aviation and motor industries, which has made us the pride of the world and contributed a huge amount to our economy.

I wish to thank my family. I want to start by thanking my wife Jill for her unstinting support. As the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) said, such support is always there in public but it is often slightly more critical in private. Her support has always been valuable. I thank my stepson Danny, who always found me a complete embarrassment when he was a teenager. He is now a trade union organiser and a councillor to boot. I also want to thank my party for backing me all these years and the Co-operative party for its backing, too. I had a long spell as a Co-operative party organiser, and I have always been strongly committed to co-operative and mutual values. I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity it gave me to work for the party and the backing it has given me here. In addition—not finally—I wish to thank Councillor Louise Ashall and Councillor Maria Crompton, who have been my assistants in West Bromwich for 19 and 18 years respectively. They are brilliant and their expertise is fantastic, and I know that, with the work they have done here for me, they have changed the lives of many individual electors in the constituency. I would like that recognised.

I said that my birth certificate told me it was time to go. That caused me to look back, and I realised that I have contested 10 parliamentary, one euro and five local government elections. I first worked in the 1964 election as a student Labour activist. I recall heckling Sir Alec Douglas-Home, Peter Walker, the father of the hon. Member for Worcester (Mr Walker)—I keep reminding him of that—and Jeremy Thorpe. I will come on to more about him in a moment. I first contested a parliamentary election when I was just 24, in South Worsopshire, against a character that older Members may remember, Sir Gerald Nabarro. I went on to contest Nantwich a couple of times in the 1974 elections, and then the Wirral by-election. That brings me to what is possibly a unique niche I have in political history: I contested two by-elections nearly 25 years apart and both on the retirement of the Speaker. It was Selwyn Lloyd in 1976 and, of course, Betty Boothroyd in West Bromwich West in 2000. I have to say that I remember the West Bromwich election a lot more fondly than the Wirral one, because 1976 was not a good year for Labour. It was even worse for the Liberals, though, because it was the height of Jeremy Thorpe’s problems. I remember exchanging pleasantries with him over a loudspeaker when he came to speak for the Liberal candidate during the campaign. I think I halved the Liberal vote and doubled the Tory vote. A week later, Harold Wilson resigned; I have always felt a bit guilty that I was perhaps personally responsible.

When I first contested an election at 24 years old, I thought I would get into Parliament as a fairly young man, but unfortunately I ran into a couple of problems. First, I have always been fundamentally committed to Europe, and at that time in the late ’80s and early ’90s, the Labour party was fundamentally opposed to it. Secondly, I was always a multilateralist at a time when the Labour party was committed to unilateralism. I realised that my parliamentary prospects were evaporating in front of me. However, I was then lucky to be employed by the Co-operative party. That movement gave me the opportunity to continue in politics, albeit in another capacity, to be my own person and to promote my own values and ideals, notwithstanding the fact that I could not do it in Parliament.

I remember an interesting occasion in 1981, during the big deputy leadership contest between Benn, Healey and Silkin. I was rung up and asked to go to Liverpool, Wavertree to speak on behalf of Denis Healey. Now, in common parlance, in political terms that is a bit of a hospital pass. The debate was dominated by Derek Hatton and the Militant Tendency. I was debating a representative for Tony Benn and a certain person by the name of Doug Hoyle, father of the current Speaker. I remember that my powers of oratory and persuasion enabled me to get exactly no votes—there were 12 abstentions.

I am running out of time so will move on and make a couple of quick observations. It has been an immense privilege to work here. I have seen how Parliament has
become more powerful vis-à-vis the Government. My five years as Chair of the Business, Innovation and Skills Committee was one of the most rewarding things I have done, and I want to see the powers of Select Committees enhanced, because they not only hold the Government to account but give the Government the insight into just how their policies are playing out on the ground, without the—shall we say—translation that comes from the layers of civil servants who advise their Ministers. Select Committees are a tremendous enhancement and a really valuable part of Parliament.

I wish to thank everybody. Despite the sharp and confrontational exchanges that take place, there is an underlying comradship and community feeling among those here that I have always found valuable. I wish my successor and everybody who comes after me all the best with the difficult decisions they are going to have to make. I will still be out there, campaigning to promote the values I have always promoted. Thank you, everybody.

4.23 pm

Sir David Lidington (Aylesbury) (Con): I will be the frank with the House: it will be a great wrench to leave this place after 27 years. You know what they say, Madam Deputy Speaker: folks are often kindest when they know you are on your way out, and there have been occasions in the past week since I announced my intention to step down when I have felt that I have been granted the privilege of attending my own funeral oration without the need to arrive in a hearse.

This afternoon, I wish to say a few brief words of thanks and to offer an expression of some hopes for the future of this place.

My chief thanks must go to my constituents in Aylesbury who have returned me as their Member of Parliament in seven successive general elections. I have to say that, when I was first selected and then elected, I was somewhat taken aback to read and research the tremendous history that comes from the layers of civil servants who advise their Ministers. Select Committees are a tremendous enhancement and a really valuable part of Parliament.

I wish to thank everybody. Despite the sharp and confrontational exchanges that take place, there is an underlying comradship and community feeling among those here that I have always found valuable. I wish my successor and everybody who comes after me all the best with the difficult decisions they are going to have to make. I will still be out there, campaigning to promote the values I have always promoted. Thank you, everybody.

As well as thanking my constituents, I want also to thank the staff of the House, as others have done. I learned, particularly as Leader of the House from 2017, how much we owe to all our staff. All of us as Members know of the service that is given to us by the Library staff, the Doorkeepers and Badge Messengers, the Clerks—the Clerks from whom I learned so much in particular about drafting and parliamentary tactics during my 11 years on the Opposition Front Bench—and the catering staff, particularly the staff of the Members’ Tea Room, who somehow always manage to remain calm and cheerful despite the pressure that we on these Green Benches often put them under.

My final point is about the future of this place. We speak often about restoration and renewal, and I think we need to look beyond just the restoration and renewal of the fabric and the services—important though I believe that to be—to the restoration and renewal of the culture of the House of Commons. For what is the purpose of this place? If it is anything, it is surely to provide a culture within which very fierce political disagreements can be expressed in a form that is civil and democratic, and actually shows to ourselves and to those we represent that we can and should resolve such
4.34 pm

Sir David Lidington (North Norfolk) (LD): I very much endorse the remarks of the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Sir David Lidington) about the nature of our political discourse and the importance of treating each other with courtesy and respect.

The right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) talked about the truths that he was told by his wife in private and the very own special relationship that he had with his wife. I want to start by thanking my partner for life, my wife Mary, and our two sons Archie and Ned for the support that they have given me throughout the 18-plus years I have been in this place. There is no doubt that the work that we do here takes its toll on our families and our loved ones. We always have to remember that and acknowledge the enormous sacrifices that loved ones make as we try to do our work here.

I also want to thank my amazing parliamentary staff, in my constituency and in Parliament, who have shown such loyalty and dedication to me over so many years. I thank the Lib Dem party activists in North Norfolk who have shown me enormous loyalty throughout the time that I have fought there. I have spent 29 years campaigning in North Norfolk because it took me 11 years to beat that lot over there to win my seat the first place. So many people have stuck with me through that period, and I am enormously grateful for it.

I thank the teams that have supported me in my role as Chair of the Science and Technology Committee and during the time that I was privileged enough to be a Minister of State in the Department of Health. Everyone will understand that, as a Liberal, I did not imagine for one minute that I would become a Minister, and then suddenly I found myself responsible for something that I cared a lot about in the Department of Health. It was the most invigorating time of my professional life, but it was made possible by amazing people who showed great dedication and commitment in supporting me through that journey.

It has been an enormous privilege to represent the Liberal tradition in this Parliament over an 18-year period, but it has also been a particular privilege to represent the people of North Norfolk. Over that period, one builds up a special bond with the people one represents. They have shown me enormous kindness and generosity of spirit, even when not voting for me, and I have appreciated that.

One of the things that has concerned me and has been an enduring thought throughout this wonderful period in Parliament is the people who come to see me with stories of how they feel that they have been ignored by faceless bureaucracies. Too often, our public organisations do not treat ordinary people with respect—do not listen to them. I have always felt that my job was to give a voice to people who have no voice and always to fight for those people. We face a profound challenge in how we get public organisations to be more responsive to ordinary people. I am always left thinking that the articulate middle classes will find their way through to achieve a result, but what about the people who do not have an articulate voice and are not able to fight the system? It is our job to make sure that we represent them individually but also try to change the system so that they are not ignored as they too often are at present.

I do not want to spend any of my time talking about things that I have done here. I just want to reflect on three causes that I have cared a lot about, continue to care a lot about, and will continue to pursue outside this place. First, there is mental health. We too often treat people like this appallingly. The second cause is reform of our drug laws. It is an unpopular cause in this place, but out there in the country there is now support—majority support—for sensible, evidence-based reform. I argue again that we need to legalise and regulate the sale of cannabis, so that we can protect our young people better. In the...
states of the United States that have legalised cannabis, use by high school-age teenagers has gone down. We leave teenagers open to the most dangerous, most potent forms of drugs, bought on the streets in this very city. We do not protect our young people with the prohibitionist approach that we take, and it is high time that we reformed those laws.

The final area that I want to touch on is assisted dying. Out there in the country, there is vast support for reform, yet this House continues to resist the case for it. So many other countries have recognised that it is time to give the right to an individual, not the state, to determine when they should end their life when they face a terminal illness. Surely, it is our right to decide, not the state’s. We leave families in an invidious position of not knowing whether they will be prosecuted if they help a loved one to end their life. This is not acceptable. It is not the hallmark of a civilised society.

Let me end my comments by saying that I have found the past three years extraordinarily difficult. This debate on Brexit is one where, unless we are in one or other of the extreme tribes, we find ourselves quite isolated. I have felt for a long time that we ought to be trying to find ways to achieve common ground and compromising to find a way forward. I feel passionately that there have not been enough people in our country trying to find ways to bring our country back together again and to heal the wounds, which have become very dangerous. I think we are playing with fire if we carry on in this way. I have felt for a long time that we ought to be trying to develop, the threats we face and what we will go on to do. I put my pen down; there is more this is something a young Tory MP can get involved in. It is a privilege to speak in this debate and follow the right hon. Member for Aylesbury said, this country has a wonderful, diverse community that comes together in solidarity, but we have allowed ourselves to become divided. Now is the time to start bringing this country back together again.

4.42 pm

Alistair Burt (North East Bedfordshire) (Con): A man walks into my surgery in Bury. I can see from his address that he comes from one of the poorest parts of the town—a council estate. He sits down, and I ask what his problem is. He says, “My front door has been broken for six weeks, and the council has done nothing about it.” I have a Labour council. I pick up my pen; this is something a young Tory MP can get involved in. “Tell me,” I said, “how does your front door come to broken?” He said, “Mr Burt, it was broken down by the police during a raid.” I put my pen down; there is more to this than meets the eye. I say to him, “What’s this got to do with the council?” He says, “It’s obvious. The police must have told the council, and if the council had told me, I’d have held the door open, and it wouldn’t have had to be broken down.” I look at him and say sternly, Mr So and So, “you must tell me: did the police find anything during their raid?” He looks all round the empty room and whispers, “Not what they were looking for, Mr Burt.”

It is a privilege to speak in this debate and follow some fine speeches. I associate myself with the support of the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) for the British Group Inter-Parliamentary Union, which I also had the joy of chairing and which does fantastic work. I associate myself with the remarks from my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Sir David Lidington) about how Parliament should develop, the threats we face and what we will go on to do. They have been fine speeches all round.

It is 36 years since my maiden speech extolled the virtues of my home town of Bury and 32 years as an MP so it is time to wrap up. I am grateful to The House magazine for giving me an extra 1,000 words this week to express a number of thanks, and I refer the House to my remarks therein; it covers a lot of my thank yous. I want to add one thank you to Chaplain Rose, who has done wonderful work and whose last engagement in the House will be as the vicar for the marriage of my son in the chapel fairly soon. We are really grateful for that. Rose has been wonderful to us all, and we love her and wish her well.

I have been exceptionally fortunate to represent first my home town and then North East Bedfordshire, where my wife and I settled post an election reverse in 1997, courtesy of T. Blair. As always with an MP’s thanks, mine are directed to those who elected me to eight terms in all—still, in my view, the highest honour and privilege of any citizen—and I say to all who have helped in those campaigns over the years, such as my chairmen in both associations, agents, canvassers and leaflet droppers, thank you all.

My thanks to a family who supported me throughout: a father who, at a sprightly 97, still watches my appearances, and to a mum who always believed in me and watches from somewhere else now. In recent years, my mother—bless her—took to calling me “Your Excellency” when I came back from my frequent trips abroad. My thanks to my very long-suffering staff—currently, Sam, Amanda, Mandy and Katherine—and to all who have given way beyond their allotted hours to me and my constituents, I say thank you.

My thanks to a Young Conservative chairman in Hornsey who threw some leaflets at me during the Greater London Council elections in 1981, thinking that I was a Labour plant, because no Conservatives turned up in Haringey in those days, and that I would not return. However, I did return, and she became not just my wife, but my partner here, and a doughty defender of those spouses who did the same. She is a much-loved participant in the Christian community and the national prayer breakfast and a trainer and supporter of women in politics at home and abroad. To her—took to calling me “Your Excellency” when I came back from my frequent trips abroad. My thanks to my very long-suffering staff—currently, Sam, Amanda, Mandy and Katherine—and to all who have given way beyond their allotted hours to me and my constituents, I say thank you.

I served not just my constituencies, but the Government over 11 years in six different roles for three Prime Ministers, and I was a Parliamentary Private Secretary to Ken Baker under another—Margaret Thatcher. To those who gave me those roles, I say thank you, and to all those in the private offices and all who worked with me and watches from somewhere else now. In recent years, my mother—bless her—took to calling me “Your Excellency” when I came back from my frequent trips abroad. My thanks to my very long-suffering staff—currently, Sam, Amanda, Mandy and Katherine—and to all who have given way beyond their allotted hours to me and my constituents, I say thank you.

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Like many of us, I am asked if I would recommend anyone to take up politics these days. My answer, I find, is rooted in being asked the same question in schools, when I have to say that the moment I begin to explain why I do the job, I find that I have exactly the same enthusiasm as I first had. When I became an MP in 1983, apartheid ruled in South Africa and the iron curtain divided Europe and the world, so who says things do not change? I came into politics because I am a child of the ‘60s. I was excited by the space programme, when it seemed we could achieve anything and the world came together, and stopped and held its breath as man stood on the moon. I had grown up with a sense of security and could achieve anything and the world came together, and when I have to say that the moment I begin to explain why I do the job, I find that I have exactly the same enthusiasm as I first had. When I became an MP in 1983, apartheid ruled in South Africa and the iron curtain divided Europe and the world, so who says things do not change?

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When I became an MP, I spent many years as a friend of those in the German Christian Democratic Union, hearing them talk about removing the inner German frontier, which seemed implausible, and sharing their enthusiasm when the wall fell, as well as being an election monitor in Berlin for the first free elections and seeing free nations—sovereign nations, just like the United Kingdom always has been—joining the EU for peace, their defence and security.

I hope colleagues will therefore forgive me when I say that the gradual but never dishonest movement of my party towards Euroscepticism and then a determination to leave the EU has hurt me more than I can possibly describe. However, that is not the reason why I am leaving. I have a chance to take all that I have been privileged to learn and experience here into new areas and to leave with friendships with colleagues and opponents—they are often the same people—still intact and in good shape, and wishing my party and the Prime Minister well for the future.

Let me therefore leave with the following requests. First, be kind to one another. Kindness is an underrated virtue. No one understands an MP’s role except us and those close to us, so if we do not help each other, no one else will. Make sure that MPs and Ministers have a serious development programme, not just an induction. Secondly, I have a couple of local matters to raise. I ask the Leader of the House please to ensure that the A1 is moved eastward from its current position, to save Sandy, and that trains do not keep skipping Arlesey station. Thirdly, I have a national request. After the inquiry, please make sure that the victims of the contaminated blood scandal, whose tie I am wearing today, receive justice for all that they have endured, as their sadly dwindling number contained some of the most decent people I have ever met. Perhaps the legislation that went through just before this debate is a measure of what could be done to help them.

In my maiden speech, I referred to Mrs Thatcher’s Government as having received much, and of us much was expected. The same applies to us all: where I have not lived up to it, forgive me; where I have, I thank those who helped me achieve it; and for what I am going to do, wish me luck. I wish you, Madam Deputy Speaker, the new Speaker and all colleagues the best of luck.

Am I still idealistic? Oh, I do hope so. Somewhere beyond the barricades, there is a world I long to see. We all want to see that world; we are just going to be working for it in different places.

4.51 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): May I begin by apologising, Madam Deputy Speaker, because there has been so much Northern Irish business over the past week that I have made my farewell speech 15 times? I am now known as the Dame Nellie Melba of west London. If anyone wishes to say any nice things about me, please let them not feel constrained by the fact that they have been said a few times already.

I leave this House with great sadness. I have to say that what tipped me over the edge was a text message from the Argyle surgery in my constituency, inviting me to attend an end of life seminar. I thought, “Maybe my time has come.” Having listened this afternoon to right hon. and hon. Members describe their glittering careers—this great cavalcade and cornucopia of achievement—I am now looking back over my years in the House with a certain sadness.

I came into the House as one of Blair’s babes in 1997. I was immediately appointed to the Broadcasting Committee, along with the right hon. Member for North Thanet (Sir Roger Gale), and we decided to set ourselves the task of ending broadcasting of the House of Commons. I was swiftly removed from the Committee, and the right hon. Gentleman was knighted—I make no comment on that.

I was then made Parliamentary Private Secretary to my right hon. Friend the Member for East Ham (Stephen Timms), who is a marvellous man. Unfortunately, I chose to vote against my Government on the part privatisation of the NHS and so had to step down. However, I was rescued from the ignominy and the outer darkness when I was made PPS to Hazel Blears, who is an amazing, wonderful woman. Sadly, I had to vote against my Government on the renewal of Trident. I was saved, and so once again fell into silence and desuetude. However, Tony Blair, a man of sound Christian principles, knowing that God loves a sinner who repents, gave me another chance. The fact that every time I appear in the Chamber my Whip has to sit next to me reveals that, sadly, not everyone believes me. I was then appointed to be PPS to the then right hon. Member for Tooting in the Department for Transport. Sadly, High Speed 2 was going to be run through my constituency, like a great steel snake slamming through the suburbs, so I felt it necessary once again to resign.

Quite clearly I have achieved very little, but one thing that I have achieved is a knowledge and understanding of this place, and a recognition that structure is a function of purpose. It is so easy to be intoxicated by the beauty of this place. When I was first elected, Tony Blair set up something called the Modernisation of the House of Commons Committee—because, frankly, most of us needed modernising. After a few months, the members of that Committee had gone completely native and were saying, “No, this is how things have always been done.” He then had to set up a modernisation of the Modernisation of the House of Commons Committee
committee. After four weeks, our Committee reported. We then installed a tights machine in the corridor just outside Annie's Bar—what else could we possibly have done?

I think of this building as the corporeal embodiment of the ship of state. This is a great, glorious galleon sailing across storm-tossed oceans. We have the sketch writers—Crace, Letts and people like that—up on the rigging. We have the galley, with our marvellous cooks who bring us steak and kidney pudding and duff on a regular basis. Not mentioned in all the tributes to the House staff are the Doorkeepers. They are wonderful people. The Library—amazing people. I must visit it one day. The Admission Order Office. If only they would tell me where it was, I would go there. And there are so many other incredible things. The bar has not been mentioned. In my day, there was more than one. The Strangers’ Bar! What more welcoming sight could there be than that cheerful face behind the bar, with the cheerful comment, “The usual, Mr Pound? But not all at once, I trust?” It is wonderful.

We have a firm hand on the wheel—it is marvellous to see, Madam Deputy Speaker. The captain for most of my parliamentary career was, of course, Tony Blair. He had a slightly tempestuous relationship with the first mate, or the purser; the man responsible for the purse strings. It was not so much Aubrey and Maturin; it was more like Captain Bligh and Fletcher Christian, to be perfectly honest—not to imply that the great Anthony Charles Lynton Blair was anything like Captain Bligh.

This great ship of state will be docking in another berth before too long. I would like to think that people realise that what is important about this place is not the gorgeous neo-Gothic surrounds, the Pugin beauty or the wonder of the place; it is what happens here and the people within it. I have to say that I do not know a single person who has come into this House with ignoble motives. I do not know anyone who has come into this House not wishing to make the world a better place. In many ways, we have failed to get that message across. If anyone had been here earlier on for the debate on television in the Chamber; we aspired to get a couple of hon. Members to dress this up in a way that would be eye-catching, but my constituency about which I wanted to make a serious point had to say something of significance. I had a problem in inches in her talk about how different it was then. We had no Chinese panties the push”. This took some explaining to intervene on me! On that particular occasion I said, “Is there anything to drink?” He said, “Yes, orange juice.” I said, “Any particular sort?” He said, “Bitter orange juice.” And then there is the hon. Member for Ribble Valley (Mr Evans), with whom I boarded in Hong Kong.

There are people on both sides who have taught me one thing: it really is not the colour of the rosette that we wear that matters. It really is not the mast to which we nail our flag: it is what is within us. It is what is within our hearts. The decency and honesty that I see all around me in this place is something that makes me bitterly regret that I will be leaving you, but it makes me immensely proud of the fact that even for a short time, for 22 years, I have been a Member of the finest legislature one could ever imagine, peopled by some of the finest personages. I would like to thank every one of you. I thank my constituents in Ealing North, and I thank this House for being such a marvellous Parliament for all the people.

4.59 pm

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Thank you so much for calling me to speak, Madam Deputy Speaker. It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who has entertained the House for many years; I enjoyed his speech very much. Today was the new Mr Speaker’s first appearance in the House and this will be my last appearance, but another date that we should recognise today is 5 November, when, in 1605, Guy Fawkes put 26 barrels of gunpowder in a shed up against the old House of Lords.

I have been very lucky to represent the Bosworth constituency for 32 years, covering Hinckley and Bosworth—over 100 square miles. It has changed dramatically. It was originally part of the Leicestershire coalfield—a mining constituency. Desford pit was running when I first went there. We had steelmaking at Desford—Desford Tubes—a great hosiery and knitwear industry, and shoes being made at Barwell.

Yesterday, when I was clearing out my office, I found my maiden speech from back in 1987. I wanted to make some kind of an impact. Colleagues who listened to the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) will have heard her talk about how different it was then. We had no television in the Chamber; we would go to get a couple of inches in The Times or perhaps be on Radio 4, but we had to say something of significance. I had a problem in my constituency about which I wanted to make a serious speech: the importation of cheap Chinese clothes, and more specifically, Chinese underwear. I had to attempt to dress this up in a way that would be eye-catching, but not too eye-catching, and the next day, one of the newspapers reported: new MP says, “Knickers to Cheap Chinkies…Lovely lassies are queueing up to support new MP David Tredinnick in his battle to give cheap Chinese panties the push”. This took some explaining in some quarters of my constituency.

Many colleagues have spoken of the importance of staff. I am pretty confident that I have the longest-serving staff in the House, and I want to thank them by name. Matthew Williams, who started work for me in February ’96, has worked for me for 23 years on the complementary and alternative medicine desk and has given great service. My parliamentary agent, Stuart Swann, has worked for me for 21 years and has taken me through all those general elections. Pippa Way has been a brilliant PA and is still working for me after six years. Her predecessor, Thurza Rowson, who was also brilliant, worked for me
for 25 years. Jill Burge worked for me in support for 10 years. These are outstanding staff. I caution anybody coming into the House against having inexperienced staff—these are very experienced staff and they have helped me enormously.

I also thank my family. My partner, Carolyn, has been a terrific support, going around the constituency with me. We share most of the meetings and it is great to have triangulation when it comes to what people are saying—sometimes she tells me things that I was not expecting. I thank Rebecca, my former wife, who supported me while child-rearing and did a fantastic job, and my wonderful children, Sophie and Thomas, who still have not forgiven me for pushing them around in a supermarket trolley wearing t-shirts that said, “Vote for Daddy”—they are now 32 and 30.

I have worked with some fantastic officers in my constituency. I want to thank the presidents, some of whom are no longer with us: Jim Davenport, Geoffrey Stokes, David Palmer, Derek Crane, Rosemary Wright and Reg Regan. The chairmen I have worked with include Jack Goulton, Anita Wainwright, David Brooks, Carol Claridge, David Palmer, Derek Crane, Janice Richards, Mary Sherwin, Peter Bedford and Betty Snow. Betty was the treasurer of the Bosworth Conservatives for very nearly 40 years.

I echo the thoughts about the staff of the House. I thank the brilliant Library staff, the catering staff and the Doorkeepers. I also thank Postman John, who retired a day ago, not only for his service—for delivering the post—but for watering my plant, which some have seen; it has grown all the way around my office over the last 20 years.

Above all, I thank my constituents for voting for me and electing me eight times in the last nine general elections that I have stood in. I remember David Lightbown, my Whip, saying to me, “Never forget your constituency is everything”. Even though I voted to remain, when my constituents voted out—60% to 40%—I regarded myself from that moment onwards not as a representative but as a delegate, and I have voted faithfully ever since to get my constituents out of Europe under both the previous Prime Minister and the current Prime Minister.

I rather regret that I am addressing retiring Members and not new Members. If I had any advice, I would quote Seneca: “A man should choose his enemies carefully.” That is very important in politics. I have tried not to have any enemies, and I hope I have not got any in my constituency—I have people in to talk to me if they do not like what I have said. I would also reference Bevan: “Stay out of the bars and specialise”—very important too. I have specialised in a couple of fields, which I will touch on if I have time. Finally, I would quote David Lightbown again: never forget your constituency base.

I did a lot at the end of the cold war. I met President Gorbachev in Moscow and President Yeltsin. President Gorbachev, who was on the news a couple of days ago, said to us young politicians, “Politics will find you every weakness and test you in every way”. I thought at the time, “I don’t think this makes any sense”, but I now know he was absolutely correct.

I have long championed alternative and complementary medicine. I have backed the homeopaths right the way through. I remember saying to my former right hon. Friend, the late Lord Spicer, “Should I keep going with this subject?” He said, “David, all a Back Bencher can hope for is to be remembered for something”. I have championed that cause ever since. So I say this to the House as I finish: we have carbon footprint problems, but a real problem is the carbon footprint of medicines. It is not being addressed, but it is hugely carbon intensive.

Madam Deputy Speaker, it has been a pleasure to serve with you in the Chair. I am sorry you did not make it to the speakership in the election yesterday, but I congratulate Mr Speaker on his success, and I thank again my constituents, my staff, my family and my friends in this House. I shall miss it, but life goes on and I have a brilliant successor on the way in the Conservative candidate, Dr Luke Evans. I encourage my constituents to vote for him.

Seema Kennedy (South Ribble) (Con): On a point of order, Madam Deputy Speaker. As this is my first and last point of order, may I seek your guidance? Is it in order for me to record my thanks to my constituents and volunteers in South Ribble, my friends and family, my wonderful teams here in Westminster and in Longton, the many fine civil servants I have served with in three Departments and the staff of the House? Is it also in order for me to wish a civil and good-tempered campaign to the many friends of all parties I have made in my four and a half years in Parliament, and to wish a happy retirement to those who, like me—I cannot believe I am 45 and retiring—are leaving this unique and most special of workplaces? Finally, Madam Deputy Speaker, I hope it is in order for me to pay tribute to my beautiful boys. Their unstinting love and support have given me depts of courage I never knew I had. They mean the world to me.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): To answer the hon. Lady’s point of order, no, none of that was in order, but I am delighted to have been able to give her the opportunity to make the tributes she wanted to make. I am sure the House will appreciate that because she holds a ministerial position, she cannot take part in this debate. Perhaps that it is a part of our procedure we ought to look at.

Helen Jones (Warrington North) (Lab): It seems only the blink of an eye since my hon. Friends the Members for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) and for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and I arrived here as wide-eyed innocents in 1997, hoping to change the world—an idea of which I, certainly, was quickly disabused when I tried to get on to the Education Committee, and made the terrible mistake of telling the Whips why I should be on it. I had been a teacher, I had a Master’s degree in education, and I had practised educational law. Of course they said, “No chance—absolutely not!” They sent me to the Catering Committee, possibly owing to some subliminal association with school dinners.

Many of us found that we were going to spend much of our time on the Back Benches. In fact, it took me 11 years to become a promising newcomer, when the Prime Minister was so desperate that he finally made me a Whip. Since then I have had a number of jobs here in Parliament, and I want not to enumerate the things that I have done, but to thank the people who have supported me in that time.
First, I thank my husband Mike and my son Chris. I met my husband when he was my parliamentary agent, and I followed that useful advice: “If you have a good agent, you should hang on to him.” My son was only seven when I was elected, and throughout his childhood had to endure the terrible embarrassment of having a mother who was an MP and who was also frequently absent. I turned up early one week, and was there when he got home from school. He said, “What are you doing here?” I said, “I live here; have you not noticed?” Clearly not.

I am very grateful first to the staff of the House who have supported me throughout those years. It is invidious to single out anyone, but I particularly thank the staff of the Tea Room, who have fed me, watered me, anticipated my needs and cheered me up through all that time. Secondly, I thank my office staff, past and present. MPs’ staff work incredibly hard, and the public often do not realise that. They work far more hours than they are paid for—IPSA please take note!—and, very often, the things for which constituents thank me are things that they have done. In fact, we decided long ago that the right response when people said, “Thank you for your letter” was “It was the least I could do”, because we did not know whether I had solved a problem for them or written to them because their mother had died.

Thirdly, I thank the staff of the Petitions Committee, past and present. It is an extraordinary privilege to chair a Select Committee, but it is a particular privilege to chair a new Committee and to be able to shape it, and I think that the Petitions Committee has been one of the successes in the House in the past few years. We have managed to pursue inquiries and not just become a clearing house for petitions, and we have pioneered new ways of communicating with the public. I could not have done that without the support of the wonderful staff who often work under extreme pressure, and also without the support of members of the Committee, who have shown that it is possible to look at issues with a clear, unprejudiced eye, and to reach common ground on how to deal with them.

Lastly, of course, I want to thank the wonderful electors of Warrington North, who have returned me in six general elections—thus proving that they are people of impeccable taste and judgment—and who have shown throughout a real decency that has supported me in difficult times. Most of my constituents are what I would call the “respectable working class”. They pay their bills on time, go to work, and keep their houses and gardens tidy. They are far too often ignored in politics, because they are not the noisy people; they are not the shouting people. In an age when there are lots of people shouting on social media, it is perhaps time we remembered that most people are decent people, and it is to them that we should be addressing ourselves.

Our politics has, I am afraid, become mired in a way of speaking which appeals to the worst in people. We hear talk of war, surrender, and so on, but politics ought to appeal to the best instincts of people, not their worst. If the House is to move forward in the future, it is the best instincts of people to which we need to appeal, because most people are common-sense people who will look for a compromise.

When I was growing up, I never expected to be an MP. I am the daughter of factory workers and the granddaughter of a miner, and I grew up on a council estate. When I was growing up if someone had said that one day I would be an MP that would have seemed as remote a possibility as my flying to the moon. It has been an incredible privilege to be here over these years and it will be a wrench to go, but we all have to go at some point and it will be a wrench whenever we decide to retire.

I have been very lucky to have a number of roles in Parliament after my 11 years on the Back Benches. I have been in the Whips Office, and I have had different Front Bench roles, including local government finance. In fact I once said to the current Opposition Chief Whip when I was doing that, “It’s very interesting,” and he said, “Helen, local government finance is important, but it is not interesting.” I found it interesting, however, which perhaps says something about me. Most of all, I am grateful for the friendships I have made here, for the comradeship that people have shown me, and for the support I have had from my colleagues in difficult times.

When I was first elected local council officers were told not to bother too much about responding to my letters, because I would only be a one-term MP. I am now the longest-serving MP in Warrington’s history, so I think I have made the point now.

I leave with regret, but with very good memories, and I say to all my colleagues in this place on both sides of the House and to my constituents what Jim Lovell said to his crew on entering orbit: “it’s been a privilege flying with you.”

5.16 pm

Mr Keith Simpson (Broadland) (Con): It is a great honour and privilege to attend one’s own obituary. It is a little bit like attending a group meeting within The Daily Telegraph, and it is also bringing back happy memories: happy memories of something I have not done for a long time—having to sit through interminable speeches waiting to be called, as one did 22 years ago when one was first called.

Unlike some of my colleagues and friends here, I suppose I was a bit of a political anorak. I began canvassing aged eight in the 1959 general election. My formidable grandmother ran the local Conservatives—my grandfather had to endure the terrible embarrassment of having a seven when I was elected, and throughout his childhood. Our politics has, I am afraid, become mired in a way of speaking which appeals to the worst in people. We hear talk of war, surrender, and so on, but politics ought to appeal to the best instincts of people, not their worst. If the House is to move forward in the future, it is the best instincts of people to which we need to appeal, because most people are common-sense people who will look for a compromise.

When I was growing up, I never expected to be an MP. I am the daughter of factory workers and the granddaughter of a miner, and I grew up on a council estate.
I have been lucky, too, in that I survived the great wipe-out of 1997; I felt like a young officer at the end of the first day of the Somme when all the officers and most of the other ranks had been killed. I was elected with a majority of 1,336. Those of us in the ’97 intake were enthusiastic, but so many friends and colleagues had been wiped out. Over the ensuing years we worked hard and, with the aid and support of our activists, we built up our majorities, and at the last general election, in 2017, I had a majority of 15,800. However, I would emphasise that that was at the last general election. Whoever takes over from me could get a bigger majority or a smaller majority.

I have loved being a Member of Parliament for my constituency and I could not have continued without the support of a number of people. Many hon. Members have made a similar comment today. First and foremost, there is my family. My wife Pepi, who is sitting under the Gallery, has given me some pretty firm advice behind the scenes and in her own way had a brilliant career. For 20 years, she was a commissioned officer in the British Army and spent most of that time serving with the military police. When she was first commissioned in 1973, it was all about deportment and flower arranging. Now, of course, it is completely different. My son, George, attended Conservative party functions from a very early age, handing the raffle round and eating as much food as he possibly could. My parliamentary secretary, Katy Craven, worked in No. 10 and then for my predecessor, Richard Ryder. She now works for me and is wondering, like a lot of our staff, what is going to happen to her when a new member of the association is selected to be the parliamentary representative on Wednesday.

I had a variety of jobs in Parliament, and let me tell you that being an Opposition spokesman is hard work with very little reward, as those now on the Opposition Benches know. I had two and a half years in the Opposition Conservative Whips Office when my right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) was the Deputy Chief Whip. He is a robust man. Of course, Madam Deputy Speaker, you were also there. You are a woman of great refinement, and I was your dresser. It was like a 19th-century film, because you would go into the little room at the back and eventually your head would appear round the door and you would whisper to me, “Will you zip me up?” As many of you know, moving a zip up a lady’s back takes a steady hand—a warm hand—and if you do it too quickly, you will probably rip the dress. If you do it too slowly, the zip gets stuck. I have to say that I learned a lot from doing that.

Of the two things I did as a Member of Parliament that have given me the greatest satisfaction, the first was being nominated by the then Deputy Chief Whip to be one of the two Parliamentary Commissioners on the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, on which I served with my right hon. Friend the Member for North Durham (Mr Jones). We made a great deal of difference, not only in helping to reorganise the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, but in representing it here in Parliament. Like many things we do on the margins of politics, I have had more compliments from constituents on that than virtually any other thing I have done. Secondly, for the last three years I have been lucky enough to serve on the Intelligence and Security Committee. I will not go into the details, but I made my views known in the urgent question that we had earlier today.

So when I leave this place, I will remember that we are in a Chamber that was rebuilt after the war, that Churchill and Attlee stood at the Dispatch Boxes and that on the Back Benches there are many Members of Parliament of all parties who work hard for their constituents. My final thought is that this has been a horrible Parliament, in the sense of the dreadful, robust debate on Brexit. I do not believe those who say that our Parliament is wrong, because we represent the divisions that are in our associations and in the country. I am a pessimist, in the sense that I do not believe those divisions are going to end with the general election. Brexit will continue over many months, if not years, and it will depend upon the quality of the people who get elected in five weeks’ time to ensure that the debate, which many hon. Members have already spoken about, is done in a civilised way. They can be emotional about it, but some of the dreadful things that we have seen MPs calling each other is a national disgrace.

I will think of you all during the general election. When it is snowing in November I shall be sitting in the TV room watching “The Crown”, drinking a large glass of whisky and watching my magnificent marmalade cat, Mr Pumpkin. He would have made a great leader of my party, on the grounds that he is beautiful, highly intelligent and a ruthless killer. God bless you all.

Ian C. Lucas (Wrexham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow the right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson); I will miss him at breakfast time.

My late father’s birthday was on 5 November. My father, Colin Lucas, and my mother, Alice Lucas, were profound influences on me and they taught me some very basic values. They taught me to tell the truth, to respect the law and always to listen to other people. I do that, and that has guided me in my parliamentary career.

I want to talk about the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee, of which I have been a member since 2015. Since 2017, it has shown Parliament at its best. It has worked across parties to produce work that I believe is world-leading. Twitter announced last week that it is stopping paid political advertising. I believe that that process was commenced by the DCMS Committee and its report on disinformation last year.

I am afraid that I am now going to change the tone of the debate, because I want to place on the record some information that I have concerning disinformation and the Government of the day. Sitting opposite me in this debate, I have seen many wonderful Conservative MPs for whom I have huge respect, people I have learned to respect since I came here in 2001. When I came to Parliament, I did not understand how Parliament worked so well on a cross-party basis. I know that now, and there are many, many noble, good and very skilled Conservative MPs. Unfortunately, they are not running the Government at this very serious time.

I want to draw the House’s attention to the serious position that exists on the cusp of a general election, because we have laws in place that are completely inadequate to deal with that general election. I want to quote the words of Dominic Cummings in correspondence that he sent to the Electoral Commission. He said:
“Overall it is clear that the entire regulatory structure around national elections including data is really bad. There are so many contradictions, gaps, logical lacunae that it is wide open to abuse...There has been no proper audit by anybody of how the rules could be exploited by an internal or foreign force to swing close elections. These problems were not fixed for the 2017 election, and I doubt they will be imminently. The system cannot cope with the fast-changing technology.”

The main adviser to the Prime Minister is telling us that the current legal structure for elections is unsound. We are going into a general election that is going to be fought online and we are already seeing the way in which that is affecting the campaign.

Margot James (Stourbridge) (Con): The Information Commissioner’s Office is empowered under the Data Protection Act 2018 to produce a code of practice for political campaigning and it has produced a code. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the next Government should put that code of practice into statute?

Ian C. Lucas: Absolutely I agree. I fundamentally believe that we should implement all the recommendations of the ICO and the Electoral Commission, because the legal structure under which we are fighting the election is open to electoral fraud. That is the position in which we are going into the general election.

On electoral fraud, I want to refer to some correspondence that Dominic Cummings sent to another person in the referendum campaign in 2016. He was talking about breaking spending limits in the referendum, and that led to an offence for which Vote Leave was fined. Dominic Cummings said:

“We’ve now got all the money we can spend legally. You should NOT send us your 100k. However, there is another organisation that could spend your money. Would you be willing to send the 100k to some social media ninjas who could usefully spend it on behalf of this organisation? I am very confident it would be well spent in the final crucial 5 days. Obviously it would be entirely legal.”

The truth is that it was not legal at all, and Vote Leave was fined in connection with that campaign. As a result, the matter was referred to the police and has now been referred to the Crown Prosecution Service, and the investigation is ongoing.

Furthermore, the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster and the Prime Minister were both aware of the fact that offences had been committed and were both heavily involved in Vote Leave. This document also has a statement from Dominic Cummings, which he wrote and sent to the Electoral Commission. He said:

“I never discussed VL’s donations to BL”—the donations to BeLeave for which Vote Leave was fined—“with either of them (before the referendum) and to the best of my knowledge neither did anybody else and they were wholly unaware of this issue until after the referendum.”

So, both the Prime Minister and the Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster were aware of Vote Leave’s offences, but they have not come clean to the House of Commons or to the DCMS Committee by producing that evidence. Furthermore, Dominic Cummings has refused to come to the DCMS Committee to speak about these matters. Even worse, the Prime Minister will not tell him to come to this House to speak to the Select Committee to explain himself and to give evidence. I have secured these documents through the Committee, and I am placing them on the public record, because they relate to something that should be known by the public before we vote in a general election. That information has been withheld from the British public, and it ought to be known.

What the British public also need to know is that, apart from the honourable Conservative Members facing me at the moment, we have a Government whose leadership includes a Chancellor of the Duchy of Lancaster who is in charge of electoral reform and who is not divulging his full knowledge of the 2016 referendum, his role in it, and the offences committed at the time. If this House is to regain the respect of the public, Select Committees need real powers to compel witnesses to attend. We should never again be frustrated by a Prime Minister who prevents a witness from giving evidence to a Committee.

It has been a real honour to be in this place. I have loved every minute. I love this House of Commons, and I will be sad to leave. We need to respect each other more in this House but—to go back to my mother and my father—we must have basic honesty. There is nothing complicated about that. Telling the truth and straightforwardness are the principles that we should stick to, but I am afraid the Government do not have them at the moment.

5.33 pm

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): The hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) made some serious allegations in his speech today, but I will not comment on them and will leave it to the Leader of the House to respond.

I start my contribution, as so many colleagues have done, with thanks to my constituents for sending to me to this place and for putting their faith and trust in me. Serving my home community—the town where I grew up and the school I went to—has been the greatest privilege of my life. Of course, like so many other Members, I want to thank my staff who have helped me so well, so efficiently and so kindly in all the work we have achieved together for my constituents.

Like my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Sir David Lidington), in the few minutes available to me today I will not talk about what I have done in this place. I want to talk about something for the next Parliament to think about.

Blazoned across the walls of Parliament today are banners promoting Parliament Week with the slogan, “It all begins with you.” Our democracy begins with, and indeed depends on, engaged and well-informed citizens. For citizens to make informed choices, they need easy access to accurate and impartial information about the work of their elected representatives in Parliament, including their voting record. Although our work in our constituencies is just as important as our work in this place, it is the actions taken here in this Chamber and in Committee that have the greatest impact on our national life.

We arguably live in an age in which it is easier to access information than ever before, but the owners and editors of media channels, including the social media platforms from which many people gather information and shape their opinions, have no responsibility or incentive to provide accurate and impartial information about our work and voting records. There are no real deterrents to misrepresentation.
Citizens often base their opinions about MPs on how they vote on particular issues. We all know that not all votes are equal and that some of the most important decisions taken in this House have been taken without a Division, but most people simply do not know that. As there are few adverse consequences for authors, publishers and social media platforms, there is widespread misrepresentation of MPs’ voting records. I believe that is contributing to the poisoning of our politics, corroding people’s trust in MPs and threatening the very foundations of our parliamentary democracy.

We have all been on the receiving end of communications from constituents that misrepresent the facts, derived from the far from perfect reporting of our voting records on websites such as TheyWorkForYou. Democracy does begin with the citizen but, right now, there is no trusted source of impartial, accurate information about the voting records and actions of MPs in Parliament to help citizens make informed choices.

In his passionate speech to the House yesterday, Mr Speaker said:

“I hope that this House will be once again a great, respected House...I hope that once again it is the envy of the world.”—[Official Report, 4 November 2019; Vol. 667, c. 619] We all share that hope, but action will be needed to turn that hope into reality. I would like Mr Speaker to take one action today and agree to work with 

Hansard
to develop a new service, in addition to its excellent verbatim reporting of parliamentary proceedings, to provide impartial contextualised information on MPs’ voting records. This will need careful consideration and cross-party support, but I hope it will be a challenge he accepts. Based on my conversations with 

Hansard, it is up for it.

If Mr Speaker takes up this challenge, he will do a great deal to shore up the foundations of our parliamentary democracy and, over time, restore trust in our politics.

I thank the thousands of volunteers who, over the next few weeks, will participate in the forthcoming general election campaign. They play an immensely important role in our democracy, too. I thank three particular volunteers, the three chairmen of the Truro and Falmouth Conservative Association who have worked hard to support me over the years: Nick Straw, Bob O’Shea and Alan Davey.

Finally, my most heartfelt thanks go to my husband, Alan, and our three wonderful children, Emily, Harriet and James, who have enabled me to be in this place and have the best job in the world.

5.39 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab):

It is an honour to follow the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), with whom I worked well when she was a Minister. She has a strong interest in Durham. Although he is not in his place, I wish to pay tribute to the right hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), who was a brilliant and dedicated Minister, and this House will really feel his loss. I wish at the beginning to put on record my congratulations to the new Speaker and to pay tribute to former Speaker Bercow for all he has done in recent years to uphold the principle of parliamentary sovereignty.

Without doubt the greatest privilege of my life has been to serve as the MP for the beautiful City of Durham, and I want to thank all the House of Commons staff, including the Library staff, for the huge help they have given me over the years—they are definitely the unsung heroes of our democracy. My life here has also been hugely helped by my friends, those in the Chamber today, colleagues in the north-east and, in particular, my hon. Friends the Members for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson), for Kingston upon Hull North (Diana Johnson), for West Ham (Lyn Brown), for Worsley and Eccles South (Barbara Keeley) and for Denton and Reddish (Andrew Gwynne). I have made long-lasting friendships that will endure beyond Parliament.

Of course, I also want to thank my fantastic staff over the years. I thank those in Westminster—Richard, Emma, Georgie, Rafi and Robyn. I also thank those in Durham—Paul, Nick and especially Christine, who has been with me since the beginning. I simply could not have done the job without them. In an age of increased automation, they are the kind, helpful voice on the end of the telephone, and they have done so much to sort out the problems for my constituents over the years.

I also want to thank my family—Tim, Maeve, Tom and Albie, and my many brothers and sisters, nieces and nephews, and extended family—for their help and encouragement over the past 14 years. I intend to have more time to see them now, and I just hope they think that that is a good idea.

In Parliament, I have worked closely with the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, the Inter-Parliamentary Union and the all-party group on the United Nations to improve our development policies and ensure that the world, not just this country, is better governed. Again, I think that the work of the staff in the CPA and IPU often goes unrecognised, and we should thank them. In here, I have relentlessly raised a number of issues that emerge from my Durham constituency: the need for more money for education; the need for universal free school meals—I pay tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Washington and Sunderland West for all the work she has done and will continue to do on that; the need for better licensing and planning policies; the need for prison reform and to look at how the penal system affects women; and the need for a greater recognition of the value that universities bring to our society and economy. I hope to continue that work beyond Parliament.

Sir John Hayes (South Holland and The Deepings) (Con): I just want to say how much I enjoyed working with the hon. Lady in that mission, both when I was a shadow Minister when her party was in government and then as a Minister. She has done outstanding work in that regard and I shall miss her contribution to the House, as well as our professional relationship.

Dr Blackman-Woods: I thank the right hon. Gentleman for those lovely comments. He, too, was a great Minister, especially in education, where I worked closely with him.

Most importantly, I want to thank my constituents. Those at my constituency Labour party, like the rest of Durham residents, are wonderful and have been hugely supportive over the years. I hope they all know that I have fought hard to try to improve and protect our public services, to improve access to education and employment and to enhance Durham’s amazing architectural and cultural heritage. I will of course continue to champion the incredible cathedral, our world-class Durham University
We have achieved an investment of nearly £100 million map in a way that it simply has not been for too long. Devon on the Government’s radar and on the political to be addressed. well as some of the unfinished business that still needs some of the things that we have been able to achieve, as minutes on this, my last day in Parliament, to talk about but it is a work in progress, and I just want to take a few and centre in that proper and very successful campaign, worked closely together to push forward on what we Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), because be too few of us after the forthcoming election. for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), who made by your strictures. Madam Deputy Speaker. I will, of course, abide 5.46 pm Peter Heaton-Jones (North Devon) (Con): I might have guessed, Madam Deputy Speaker. I will, of course, abide by your strictures. It is an absolute pleasure to follow the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods), who made a typically thoughtful speech. It is great to follow a Member with a double-barrelled name; I fear there will be too few of us after the forthcoming election. It is also a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton), because we are part of the south-west mafia. There is a group of MPs from Somerset, Devon and Cornwall who have worked closely together to push forward on what we need for our region, and my hon. Friend has been front and centre in that proper and very successful campaign, but it is a work in progress, and I just want to take a few minutes on this, my last day in Parliament, to talk about some of the things that we have been able to achieve, as well as some of the unfinished business that still needs to be addressed. We have had success since 2015 in putting North Devon on the Government’s radar and on the political map in a way that it simply has not been for too long. We have achieved an investment of nearly £100 million for a vital new road link in North Devon. People have heard me bang on about the North Devon link road enough in this place, and it would be silly for me not to do so on my last appearance. It is a vital bit of infrastructure investment, and I am so pleased that we have secured it.

We have also secured the future of the Royal Marines base at Chivenor in the constituency. There was a huge community campaign after the Ministry of Defence said that it was earmarked for closure. The community got together and said, “Up with this we will not put.” I am delighted to say that not only is Chivenor now safeguarded for the future, but that even as late as today I have been talking to the Ministry of Defence to make sure that we can do more there with the unique environment and the service personnel.

North Devon has a commitment to a brand-new district hospital, which is so welcome. Even though I will no longer be the MP, I am going to ensure that we stick to that commitment and that the Government continue to deliver on their promises for the NHS.

All those are things we have achieved, but I mentioned some unfinished business, and I wish to cover three subjects briefly. First, just like, I am sure, Members from all parties, I continue to be concerned by the state of mental healthcare for our young people in particular. It is an absolute shock to realise that the most common cause of death among young men aged between 18 and 35 is not an accident or an incident, or a drugs overdose or a physical illness; it is that they take their own lives. That is a mental health condition that we must tackle, and all Governments of all colours must do so urgently. I have done a lot of work on social care and the regulation and inspection of care homes, and that needs to continue.

I really do not want to go down this road too controversially, but I worked for the BBC for many happy years. The BBC and the Government of whatever colour must ensure that the over-75s continue to get the free licence fee concession. I have spoken about that at great length, and I do not intend to rehearse all those arguments now.

As we are on the subject of the media, may I just say a few words about social media, which was touched on by other colleagues? The pressure that MPs find themselves under because of social media is something that has not been sufficiently addressed. I am fortunate in that I have not suffered the sort of threats, abuse or intimidation that many other colleagues in this House have, but none the less—I think that you only get this if you have been an MP—the constant low-level incoming does start to chip away. I do not think that this House, the social media companies or our legislation have caught up with what can be done about that. This happens, as has been said earlier, during election periods. We need to ensure that the role of social media during this and all future elections is more tightly controlled under law and under regulation.

I want quite properly to thank people without whom it would not have been possible for me to do this job. First, the North Devon Conservative Association has been a huge support to me ever since I was selected to do this role at the beginning of 2013. May I just mention the three chairs of the North Devon Conservative Association: Jeremy Smith-Bingham, David Barker and the current chair, Chris Guyver, who I have put in a pickle having to reselect a North Devon candidate in the space of a few days. [Interruption.] Does my hon. Friend
the Member for Reigate (Crispin Blunt) know him by any chance? It sounds like he might. I want to thank all the Ministers and officials and the special advisers who I worked with when I was Parliamentary Private Secretary at two Departments—the Department for Work and Pensions and the Ministry of Justice. It was a pleasure to serve them and to serve the Government in that role.

I thank my colleagues, the south-west MPs, including my hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth, who I am glad to see in her place. All of us, across the region, have worked really hard since 2015—there have been a lot of us since 2015 and long may that continue—to promote the south-west and its interests. I also thank my absolutely brilliant staff in the constituency and here at Westminster. Let me just mention by name my four current members of staff. Thank you very much indeed to Matt Cox and to my three members of staff who have been with me since the beginning in 2015: Marianne Kemp, Dan Shapland and David Hoare, who have all been brilliant in helping me along.

Finally, I thank the people of North Devon, who did me the privilege and honour of electing me not once, but twice to be their Member of Parliament in North Devon. Helping them, assisting them, meeting them, and sometimes having animated conversations with them really has been an honour and a privilege, and I wish my successor in the role all the very best. I clearly hope that whoever takes over from me as Chair of the Committee covering the people of Burma and Bangladesh. I hope that the spirit is embodied by the campaign for justice for those who lost their lives at Hillsborough 30 years ago. I pay tribute to the families and campaigners who did so much to ensure that that injustice was properly addressed. It is a city with a very vibrant community and voluntary sector. One of the things I have done is to volunteer at a local food bank at St John’s church in Tuebrook in my constituency. I think there is something profoundly wrong when people in this day and age are relying on food banks, but I pay tribute to those who work in them.

When I lost in 2005, I sought refuge in Liverpool, and I am immensely grateful to my local Labour party and to the people of the great constituency of West Derby in the city of Liverpool for electing me three times since 2010. Liverpool is a city with a truly amazing spirit, and that spirit is embodied by the campaign for justice for those who lost their lives at Hillsborough 30 years ago. I pay tribute to the families and campaigners who did so much to ensure that that injustice was properly addressed. It is a city with a very vibrant community and voluntary sector. One of the things I have done is to volunteer at a local food bank at St John’s church in Tuebrook in my constituency. I think there is something profoundly wrong when people in this day and age are relying on food banks, but I pay tribute to those who work in them.

Education has long been my No. 1 passion, and I served for three years as Minister for Schools. In that role, I set up and led the London Challenge programme to improve schools here in the capital city. In Liverpool, I have run the Liverpool to Oxbridge Collaborative, to encourage more state school students to consider Oxford or Cambridge. I also chair the all-party parliamentary group on global education. Since 2015, it has been an honour to chair the Select Committee on International Development. I thank its staff and all its Members, past and present—in particular, my friend the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy). It is so important that the UK remains engaged globally, and one of the ways in which we do that is through our commitment to development and humanitarian relief. We can be proud of our 0.7% commitment and that we have an independent Department—the Department for International Development—that leads in the delivery of those programmes. We face huge challenges of climate change, conflict, poverty and inequality, and we have the tool of the sustainable development goals to address these crises, but we also need to maintain our focus on some appalling humanitarian situations in places such as Yemen and Syria, as well as the Rohingya crisis covering the people of Burma and Bangladesh. I hope that whoever takes over from me as Chair of the Committee will pick up those challenges.
In 1997, my right hon. Friend the Member for Exeter (Mr Bradshaw) and I were the first ever Members of Parliament who were openly LGBT at the time of our first election. I pay tribute to our friend Lord Smith of Finsbury, who for a long period was the only openly gay Member of Parliament. I am very proud that there are now 45 Members in this House who are openly LGBT and that we have seen huge legal progress in this country, although we still have a long way to go to achieve full equality across the world. Thanks to civil partnerships, I was able to marry Mark 13 years ago. We always called our civil partnership a marriage, but I was then very proud to vote with others across the House for equal marriage. I really thank Tony Blair, Gordon Brown and David Cameron, all of whom showed great commitment to the cause of equality for people who are LGBT. As we move forward, I hope that we will address some of the very big challenges that LGBT people face around the world and ensure that part of our soft power and our approach to global human rights is about addressing those injustices, wherever they rear their heads.

I conclude by echoing comments made by a number of Members, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones), who talked about the importance of appealing to the best instincts of the British people, and the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who spoke very powerfully about how we need to bring people together. We have seen a growth of a particular strand of authoritarian populism across our continent and in the United States, Brazil and other parts of the world. It poses a huge challenge for our politics. Here in the UK, Brexit is in a sense both a consequence and a cause of some very fundamental divisions and inequalities that scar our society.

Against that backdrop, I hope that the new Parliament will be able to do its best to bring people back together. I have never liked the adversarialism in this place. I did not like it when I was a Government Member with a majority of almost 200; I certainly do not like it in opposition. I think we do really have a lot in common with each other. We need to be more open about the need to address the evidence that is available on the policy challenges that we face. One of the reasons I have enjoyed chairing a Select Committee is that it is cross-party working and it is based on the best available evidence, not the best available slogan for carrying the headlines working and it is based on the best available evidence, not the best available slogan for carrying the headlines.

I would like to echo what my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Sir David Lidington) said. In doing so, I quote a former Member of Parliament for Stafford, the great playwright Richard Sheridan, who said:

“remember, now, when you meet your antagonist, do everything in a mild and agreeable manner.”

I entirely agree with that.

It has been a great honour to represent the people of Stafford for the past nine and a half years. Stafford has a breadth of landscapes, from the Trent valley to Cannock Chase, where we have the beautiful memorials of the cemetery for Commonwealth soldiers, mainly New Zealanders, but also the main German cemetery in the United Kingdom. I would encourage Members to visit that cemetery. It is in the most beautiful valley in Cannock Chase. We have farmlands. We have lovely villages such as Penkridge, and we have Stafford itself. Again, I would encourage Members who have the chance in June or July to see the open-air Shakespeare by Stafford castle—one of the best performances of Shakespeare that you could possibly hope to see, with a different play every year.

I pay tribute to all those in my constituency who have worked so hard through often very testing times around our hospital, then called Stafford Hospital and now called County Hospital. There were those who lost their loved ones and who saw their loved ones suffer, but also all those who worked in the NHS and tried so very hard, both at that time and subsequently, to give us what is now, I believe, a very good service. That led to the Health and Social Care (Safety and Quality) Act 2015, which I had the honour to present as a private Member’s Bill. When I see the work that my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), the former Health Secretary, has done on patient safety, and the work he is intending to do now with his charity, I am relieved that the issue of patient safety has come to the fore.

Sir John Hayes: I cannot let that pass without paying tribute to my hon. Friend’s outstanding work in that field, which typifies his whole approach. His care, his insight and his dedication to purpose are exemplary. The whole House will miss him. Might I just cheekily ask him to work with me, when he has more time, on the campaign on haemochromatosis, which affects nearly 380,000 people? He can work from outside Parliament; I can work within it.

Jeremy Lefroy: I can never resist anything that my right hon. Friend says, so I will most definitely do what I can.

I would like to pay tribute to all those who work in our schools and colleges, police service, fire and rescue service, ambulance service and the local councils. We have three very good local councils, with excellent staff and councillors who make a real difference. I would also like to pay tribute to the businesses in my constituency. We have two new business parks. General Electric could have relocated elsewhere in the UK or, indeed, the world, but we were able to retain it in Stafford by having a wonderful new business park at Redhill, where we are the only manufacturer of large transformers in the UK. We manufacture many other things in the constituency, including the world’s best lawnmowers and some of the
world’s best washing machines. Never let it be said that all these things are only manufactured outside the country. They are not; they are manufactured right here.

My constituency has a wonderful agricultural sector. People have told me that the constituency of Stafford produces about 10% of the UK’s strawberries. I do not know whether that is the case, but it certainly produces a lot. The former resident of Stafford, that great author Izaak Walton, said:

“Doubtless God could have made a better berry, but doubtless God never did.”

We also have the country’s largest producer of spinach, as well as one that produces 1 million lettuces a week in season, alongside other arable and dairy. It is a great pleasure to see my hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Paul Farrelly) in his place—I had the pleasure of being defeated by him in 2005.

The voluntary sector is very large in Stafford, and I would like to place on record my desire to see an awful lot more done for unpaid full-time carers. I am working with a constituent on providing more breaks for unpaid carers. They often do not have the resources, and they do not have the time, but they need those breaks. We all value our holidays. Why should they not have them, even if it is a week a year? I would like to see that become a priority.

I would like to pay tribute to my neighbours, my right hon. Friend the Member for South Staffordshire (Gavin Williamson) and my hon. Friends the Members for Stone (Sir William Cash), for Cannock Chase (Amanda Milling), for The Wrekin (Mark Pritchard) and for Stafford (Actor Boulton), as well as others in Staffordshire, all of whom have been most generous to me. When I had the misfortune of falling ill and fainting during the address of President Obama in Westminster Hall, it was my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) who looked after me and my hon. Friend the Member for The Wrekin who visited me in St Thomas’ Hospital.

I must pay huge thanks to my staff: my magnificent chief of staff, James Cantrill, who has had to endure a lot in these difficult times, and Pauline Ingall, Sonya Redfern-Price, Alex Simpson and Jan Owens. In my constituency, I would like to thank Ann Foster, who has chaired the Conservative association for many years, Ray Sutherland and Amyas Stafford Northcote; at this difficult time for him, I wish him God’s blessing. I also want to thank Owen Meredith, James Nixon and Hetty Bailey, who have all worked for me in this place. Above all, I want to thank my wonderful wife Janet, who has combined supporting me here with being a full-time GP and university lecturer at Keele medical school. I simply could not have done it without her support.

Finally, I would like to echo the point made by my right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) about the importance of looking outwards and discussing what is happening in the world much more than we do, as my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby said. We are sometimes told that we talk too much about what goes on outside this country, but all those things are relevant to our constituents. Africa has a population of 1.2 billion, which will go up to 2.4 billion. We need to support them in the creation of hundreds of millions of jobs. Otherwise, they will look elsewhere. People do not want to migrate. They want to stay where they are, with their families, but if they are forced to for a better life, they will. We have to look at what we can do.

In terms of world health, Ebola is still in the Democratic Republic of the Congo and has spread into Uganda. We have to do more research on antimicrobial resistance. Otherwise, we will face great challenges. There are also the issues of climate change, conflict resolution and freedom of speech and religion; I pay huge tribute to my hon. Friend the Member for Congleton (Fiona Bruce) and the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who have done magnificent work on the latter.

I will finish with two quotations from Izaak Walton. He said:

“He that loses his conscience has nothing left that is worth keeping.”

And, for those of us who are not standing again, he said, “Be grateful for the simple things in life. Don’t take them for granted.”

6.9 pm
Terese Pearce (Erith and Thamesmead) (Lab): I would like to thank my fantastic family, my friends and my staff, who are amazing, as well as all the people I have worked with here and in the constituency, but most of all I would like to thank my husband, who nine years ago put his life, dreams and ambitions on hold so that I could follow mine.

When you come into this place, it is the strangest thing. The first thing I did was to look for a job description, and as hon. Members all know, there is none. You become a combination of a councillor, a barrack-room lawyer, a trade union official and a social worker, yet an MP’s power, particularly in opposition, is more perceived than real. People ask you to get involved in everything and anything. When I was elected, I got 22,000 emails in the first year. The level of expectation from people is that you can solve everything from mice in their flat to conflict in the middle east, and of course the bins—there is always the bins. There are myriad ways that people can watch you now, and I am told by my constituents that I need to be at all these events in the constituency, but then the same people say to me. “I was watching the Chamber, and you weren’t in there. Where were you?” And at the same time, they want to know why you have not answered the 22,000 emails, which is why many people receive replies from me at 1 o’clock in the morning.

There was much I wanted to say this afternoon about the things I had done and the things I wished I had done, but we have sat here and passed the Historical Institutional Abuse (Northern Ireland) Act. I listened to that testimony and it was familiar to me, so I have changed what I planned to say because I needed to say this. I could talk about what I have achieved, but what has been achieved by me here has actually been achieved because of my parents. Both of my parents were brought up in care—my mother in the infamous Nazareth House, which we heard about earlier, and my father by the Christian Brothers—and I can give personal testimony about the damage done to them for the whole of their lives. The shadow Minister, my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound), who is no longer in his place, asked from the Dispatch Box: what must those children have thought of adults, and how could
they ever trust? Well, I can tell the House that they never did. It became increasingly difficult as they got older, when we needed to get carers or meals on wheels to go in, because everybody who came in who they thought was from the authorities they sacked immediately the same day. They feared to the very end of their lives losing their liberty, because they had lost it as children when they had been incarcerated.

It is testimony to my parents that they never visited on me and my sister Rose the horrors of their childhood, and it is testimony to them that I am an MP now. My mother lived to see me elected, and she was as proud as punch. Sadly, my dad died in 2009, so he did not get the same bragging rights. My dad, Arthur Farrington, was what people would call a bit of a character. He had a tendency to embellish the truth, and sometimes he just made things up. He used to say to me and my sister that he was born in the workhouse, but then he used to say a lot of things so we did not take a lot of notice. When I was elected and was doing research on children’s homes in the 1930s, it came as a huge surprise to find that his parents were actually resident in Ormskirk workhouse at the time he was born. It seems I owe my dad a bit of a punch. Sadly, my dad died in 2009, so he did not get the same support.

It is a privilege to hold the office of MP. I left school at 17, got married soon after and became a mother, but at 18 I found myself deserted by my husband and facing the world alone with a small baby and bleak prospects while the rest of my friends went to university. However, thanks to a small council flat in Belvedere, a GLC-funded day nursery and a Bexley Council-funded careers adviser, I was set on the road to independence, self-respect and a career. I have been successful and my family has thrived because society invested in me, and that investment has been paid back over and over. Sadly, however, those services no longer exist for many who find themselves in the same circumstances and do not have that ladder. In fact, the safety net of the welfare state that once saved me no longer exists in that real sense. It is more like a trapdoor you fall through and you may never get back through.

It was immensely privileged to be chosen at the very last moment to stand for Arundel and South Downs for the Conservatives, and I believe that someone else will be very lucky indeed to be chosen at the very last minute to stand for what I believe is the best constituency in the country, full of the most wonderful people and strong communities. I will miss it a very great deal.

I made my maiden speech in a debate on rural issues. I spoke last in that debate, too, and nobody told me that it was billed as a rising star. I then plummeted into the depths of the Home Office, a fall from which I never entirely recovered.

I soon found myself on the Front Bench and, for a very brief time—this is a salutary lesson for all the young people who will enter the House after the election—was billed as a rising star. I then plummeted into the depths of the Home Office, a fall from which I never entirely recovered.

I agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Aylesbury (Sir David Lidington) that attending this debate, in which we have heard some marvellous speeches, is rather like attending the reading of one’s own obituary. I am not entirely certain that everyone would be effusive enough, so I intend to list some of the things that I have been involved in—my serious point is that I intend to continue working in a number of important areas that I have worked on in this place. They include LGBT rights, which my friend the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) mentioned, the campaign for equal marriage, setting up the all-party parliamentary group on global lesbian, gay, bisexual and transgender rights, and setting up the Global Equality Caucus, run so ably by Alan Wardle and supported by Andrew Slinn.
I also set up the all-party parliamentary group on global tuberculosis, to help fight the world’s deadliest disease. The Global TB Caucus has succeeded in driving TB up the agenda, with a high-level meeting at the United Nations. It is ably led by Sarah Kirk, with support on the APPG from Janika Hauser, and it was set up with brilliant initial work by my friend Matt Oliver.

I have recently assumed the chairmanship of the Countryside Alliance, which I intend to devote a lot of time to, returning to my roots, because I believe passionately in supporting rural communities, in the freedom to choose and in ensuring that we protect the rural way of life. I will be running the think-tank that I have set up, the Project for Modern Democracy, just as I previously set up the think-tank Reform, because I believe we need new thinking on Whitehall reform, planning and how we ensure markets operate fairly in the modern world.

I just want to say something briefly about Brexit. I set up the national no campaign against joining the euro. For a long time I was thought of as a Euro-sceptic, but I led the Conservatives In campaign to remain in the European Union. Nevertheless, I accepted the result of the referendum immediately. I want to dispute the idea that the only principled position for remainers to take is somehow to gainsay the referendum result. I do not believe that that is true. Actually, I think it is a principled and honourable position to accept the result of the referendum, because in the end it is about democracy.

I have done that, which is why I support the Prime Minister in successfully seeking a deal. I do not think that we should demonise the millions of people who voted for remain, but have accepted the result and think a deal is possible. Rather, we should investigate more closely why people voted for leave and what exactly they wanted, and have a more mature, sober and sensible debate on those issues.

Finally, I would like to thank my brilliant staff: Michelle Taylor, my wonderful constituency assistant; Alex Black, who runs my office; Lynsey White, my wonderful secretary; and Chris Cook, my researcher. I would like to thank members of my Conservative association and my chairman, Angela Litchfield, Sue Holland, Malcolm Gill and Peter Griffiths. I thank my constituents for doing me the great honour of returning me to Arundel and South Downs. Above all, I thank my partner, my closest and best friend, Jason Eades, without whose tireless and unquestioning support I would never have been able to do this job in the first place. Thank you all for doing me this great honour. I am very sad to be going, but I know it is the right time to do so.

6.21 pm

John Woodcock (Barrow and Furness) (Ind): What a privilege it is to follow that heartfelt speech. It is also a coincidence, because, as the majority of the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) has gone up at every successive election, mine has gone down. [Laughter.]

In 2010, when I first came into the House, we achieved the best result away from Labour in the entire country. In the most recent general election, in 2017, I hung on by a mere 209 votes. As most people who looked at that will know, it is a total miracle that I am here at all. I never expected to be able to make a valedictory speech and I have viewed every single day of this Parliament as an extra, unexpected bonus. It was hard enough to hold the constituency of Barrow and Furness, the home of the Trident nuclear submarine programme, with the former Leader of the Opposition, the right hon. Member for Doncaster North (Edward Miliband). People, probably understandably, did not trust him entirely on the issue of Trident. However, it was an impossibility to hold the constituency with the current Leader of the Opposition. It was only by completely disavowing him that I was able, against all expectations including mine, to hang on.

I have, of course, paid in one way or another since then, but I will never forget the moment at 1 o’clock in the morning of election night when I thought, “My goodness, we might actually hold on here.” I had to get on the phone to my ex, Mandy, who ran my campaign to get me into Parliament in the first place, and say, “Look, you know I’ve offered to take the kids all summer, well...” I am deeply indebted to her for her forbearance on that and on so many issues, as we have made a crazy modern family life work. More on that towards the end of my speech.

I want to say how sad I am to be leaving, but I think we can be really proud of some of the things we have achieved over these past nine and a half years. The brand new maternity unit literally would not have happened without the campaign led by local mums, including Mandy. Of course, I supported the campaign wholeheartedly—I knew what was good for me—but it showed that when the people of Barrow and Furness stand up, they are able to make themselves listened to. Together, we have effected real change.

The Leader of the House knows that it is more unusual to win a vote at the moment than it is to lose one, and 18 July 2016 will always be etched on my memory as the day that this House voted by 472 votes to 117 to renew Trident and fire the starting gun properly on the Dreadnought submarine programme, which, even now, is providing 9,000 directly employed jobs and sustaining the whole Furness economy. I am just sad to be leaving at a time when we are making critical decisions on how we ensure that that investment can lift the whole area out of the still really appalling pockets of deprivation and the lack of hope that remains in the Furness area. If I can play any role outside this place—possibly in a David Brent way, if I keep turning up to former offices—I want to play whatever role I can to ensure that that can happen in future.

I came into this House having been privileged to serve as a special adviser for a period in No. 10, and I never thought that the life of a constituency MP—trying to help the community change and lead that change—would be what drove me. That is what I will miss most of all from the job. It is well known in this place, but completely unknown outside it, how relatively little of that we drive ourselves as MPs, so—like many others—I need to give my heartfelt thanks to my team. Frank, Natalie, Angela, Carmen and the new arrival, Sian, have done extraordinary things. Literally thousands of people have had their lives changed for the better in ways that, more often than not, I have not known about personally, but they have delivered. I am so pleased that Cassie, my office manager, has come all the way here—it is a hell of a long way to get down from Barrow; it takes four hours on the train on a good day—and is in the Gallery today. Like a number of my staff—but this is particularly so in
her case—she has stuck with me through some really difficult times and has stayed loyal, and I will always be grateful for that.

As a constituency MP, I am proud of what we have done, but I wish that I could be proud of what we have achieved in our politics over the last 10 years. We are not standing here as a Parliament of success. I am sorry that my attempt to wrestle my politics—the politics of the progressive centre-left—out of the hands of the extremists that have gripped my former party has not been a success. I am really grateful to my friends—who will remain my friends—in the Labour party, even though we have taken a very different view on how best to tackle that extremism.

I am really excited about the challenge that I am going on to as the Government’s special envoy on countering violent extremism; I want to continue to play a role in public life. Although I am sad to be leaving, I am leaving for absolutely the best reason: it was not part of the script that Issy and I would be having a baby, but it is a wonderful, wonderful thing on which to leave. Their two sisters, Maisie and Molly, are going to be wonderful big sisters, and I just cannot wait for the future that we have got together.

Madam Deputy Speaker (Dame Eleanor Laing): We all wish the hon. Gentleman and his future family all the very best.

6.28 pm

Paul Farrell (Newcastle-under-Lyme) (Lab): It is a pleasure to follow my hon. Friend from Barrow and Furness—I suggest that he tries for size a majority of 30 on the third count at 6.30 in the morning.

I am sorry not to have been here to listen to all the speeches, Madam Deputy Speaker. Once upon a time this was going to be a normal working day; I had a delegation from Slovenia here for a tour. Everyone will know that being a tour guide is an occupational hazard. We were all attending the internationalism of this place has always been a surprise pleasure that I will certainly miss.

I also thank the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) for kindly losing to me in 2005—in the nicest possible way and as only he knows how—because otherwise I would not be here making these remarks. I still have his campaign T-shirt, which I found tidying up my cupboard, and which I asked him for as a present. I will keep it and cherish it.

It feels strange to clear an office after 18 years. While packing up, I came across umpteen spare copies of my maiden speech from 2001, and I remember it well. I felt I had drawn the short straw, having to follow the lyrical Welsh tones of Adam Price, now the leader of Plaid Cymru. It felt like trudging in the footsteps of Richard Burton in a theatre auditions. In making my speech, I felt sure I was the only grandson of a rabbit trapper from County Meath in Ireland, to take his place on these green Benches. Now as I leave, I can burnish my Celtic credentials further, because on 2 March—my 57th birthday—the perfect present popped through the letterbox: my Irish passport. Whatever happens after the election, I will be remaining—no ifs, no buts, come what may—a citizen of the European Union, as will my three long-suffering children.

It has been a privilege to serve as the MP for Newcastle-under-Lyme, my home town. I was the first born and bred “castle black”, as we say, for—we, I haven’t been able to find another going back 500 years. But 2001 was not my first general election; that came when I stood in Chesham and Amersham—my dry run—in 1997. So one of my first thanks this afternoon goes to my agent 22 years ago, Peter Ward, and his wife, Doreen, who wished me all the best again this week. I must also mention again the wonderful Keith Kingswood, the local constituency secretary back then. Just before the ’97 election, Keith flew to New York to see his son and collect a postal vote but tragically on the flight over contracted a mystery illness from which he did not recover. The day after the Blair landslide, while Labour was partying on the south bank, we were all attending Keith’s funeral in Chesham. My thoughts today are again with his wife Janet and his family.

This job would be impossible without the support of families, so I have to thank my wife Victoria for putting up with all the late nights, the weekends away, the overseas visits and all the football and, in particular, rugby—she curses Commons and Lords RUFC. She was also the one person I forgot to thank on election night in 1997. In turn, I have never been allowed to forget it. In Newcastle-under-Lyme, I want to pay a special tribute to the first person I met when I first went back to help in 1993: a truly great council leader, Eddie Boden, who turns 80 in a few weeks. Happy birthday from Westminster, Eddie. My agent in Newcastle all these years, David Leech, has been a rock of support and strength. Sadly, he lost his wonderful wife and soulmate, Cynthia, last year. Newcastle is much emptier without her.

Nothing could prepare me for this place. I was never a student politician or part of any network. I first got involved in politics in 1987, aged 25, when I took the day off work in London to do something, finally, about Margaret Thatcher. Through the occasional rebellions—student tuition fees, the dreadful war in Iraq, the dreaded B-word today—David and my officers in the constituency have always been loyal, steadfast and true. It was because of their efforts that a week last Friday in Newcastle-under-Lyme we were able to celebrate 100 years of continuous Labour representation in Parliament. We are one of only five constituencies in the whole of the UK to be able to do so. My majority might be a bit tight—we are one of 11 reluctant members of the “under 100” club—but I keep reminding people that at over 21,000 the Labour vote in Newcastle in 2017 was the biggest of my five general elections and the highest since that landslide under Tony Blair in ’97. It is the task of my successor as candidate, who was selected on Friday, to recreate that progressive alliance.

Politics is a difficult and demanding trade, and that has never been more true than in these testing time, in the age of social media, but in this job one really can make a difference and be proud of doing so, for constituents and causes and projects that leave a legacy for the future. At the outset in Westminster, I was rebellious enough to stand up for students over high and variable tuition fees and had the temerity to organise a rebellion. I next crossed swords with my own Government through...
[Paul Farrelly]
a private Member's Bill to ensure fairer treatment of temporary and agency workers—protections eventually implemented, we should remember, by a European directive that helped vulnerable and low-paid people in 28 countries.

I am also glad to have stood up for my beliefs in not voting for the legislation that paved the way for the referendum, or for the triggering of article 50. I understand that I am the only member of the Labour party to have departed from the whip on both those occasions, and the same applies to the right hon. and learned Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) who departed from the whip on both those occasions, and the right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) has served his party so well. He has been an excellent Chief Whip—I do not suppose that many people say that, but I will—and has given 33 years of devotion to the House. I also thank Mrs McLoughlin. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) has had extensive experience of posts ranging from parliamentary private secretary to Chair of a Select Committee.

The right hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas)? An outstanding solicitor who diverted people and moved them to another point to as the “dead cat on the table”—he was always the one who achieved little. He was true to herself. She is also a formidable coach of the Conservative party. I am proud, too, to have served for 14 years on the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee. The Committee has certainly made a difference, pursuing phone-hacking and, more recently, investigating fake news and abuse of social media, as well as helping to change libel law in the interests of my former profession: responsible, serious investigative journalism.

Locally, there is much for Labour, and retired colleagues in north Staffordshire, to be proud of, such as our brand-new hospital and the excellent Newcastle college, to name but two. In Newcastle, my favourite place of all is the wonderful Peter Pan Nursery for Children with Special Needs, and I want to record my thanks to Peter Traves, who was Staffordshire’s education director until 10 years ago, for his help in securing its future in brand-new premises opposite my old school in Wolstanton. He is simply the best officer in the public sector with whom I have dealt in 18 years.

Let me end with two final votes of thanks. This job would be impossible without great staff. I have had wonderful staff doing a wonderful job for constituents—Caroline Eardley, who has been with me throughout, Dr Barry Schofield and Martin Bell—and, in Westminster, Hannah Matin, Thomas Brayford and, for so many years, Dr Neil Watkins. We always need good officers in our constituency parties, and I want to thank the chair of my constituency party, Allison Gardner, for her wonderful support. Her drive and motivation, and her great sense of humour, made the last two elections enjoyable, and without her help I would not be standing here today.

Finally, I thank colleagues across parties for all the work that we have done here in those years. I will certainly miss them, and I will miss it.

Mr Speaker: May I suggest that the shadow Leader of the House and the Leader of the House split their speaking time accordingly?

6.36 pm

Valerie Vaz (Walsall South) (Lab): Thank you, Mr Speaker. I congratulate you on your victory, and I know that you will make a very good Speaker.

When I first sat here today, 60 Members were saying that they would be leaving the House. The number has now risen to 62, following the announcements by the right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) and the ex-Chancellor, the right hon. Member for Runnymede and Weybridge (Mr Hammond) that they would be standing down.

The speeches were a bit like maiden speeches to start with—everyone has such a beautiful constituency—but what was clear was the amazing array of talent that we are losing. The right hon. Member for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) has served his party so well. He has been an excellent Chief Whip—I do not suppose that many people say that, but I will—and has given 33 years of devotion to the House. I also thank Mrs McLoughlin. My right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) has had extensive experience of posts ranging from parliamentary private secretary to Chair of a Select Committee.

The right hon. Member for Wrexham (Mr Vaizey)—I know that he added “Didcot”, but the annunciator said “Wantage”—is not standing down; he was contributing to the pre-Dissolution debate. He talked about the arts, and I want to thank him, because when he was in opposition he visited the New Art Gallery in Walsall, where anyone who goes into the lift will hear the voice of Noddy Holder.

My hon. Friend the Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) was true to herself. She is also a formidable coach of Arsenal Ladies Football Club. I agree with her about Balj Rai—he is absolutely fantastic—and I want to pay tribute to Max Freedman, in her office, who made a great contribution to the independent complaints and grievance process.

The right hon. Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) leaves a huge legacy. He was what people refer to as the “dead cat on the table”—he was always the one who diverted people and moved them to another point in the debate—but his nickname was “the Minister for the ‘Today’ programme”. He is right about debates on foreign affairs: we need more of those. I hope the Leader of the House does not mind my raising again the case of Nazanin Zaghari-Ratcliffe, and expressing the hope that she will soon be released from prison.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd) is an extensive human rights champion, and a champion for miners’ compensation—the subject of miners was a thread running through the debate—and, of course, she was a human rights envoy. She has produced an incredible body of public service, both as a Member of the European Parliament and as an MP. Wales is also losing my hon. Friend the Member for Pontypridd (Owen Smith) and my hon. Friend the Member for Ynys Môn (Albert Owen), whom I have worked with. I hope he will continue his work with Welsh tourism.

What can we say about my hon. Friend the Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas)? An outstanding solicitor and an outstanding Minister who has a great way of asking important questions. He has made an important contribution to the debate today about how we run our elections. He will be missed, but we can see him in the documentary “The Great Hack.”

When I first came to this House in 2010, the right hon. Member for Putney (Justine Greening) said that Michael Howard had visited her constituency, and had resigned as leader. Maybe he knew—this is what came across to me when I first saw her at the Dispatch Box—that she could be a future leader of her party. I am sorry that she is standing down because I think she would have been an excellent leader and an excellent Prime Minister. She did some fantastic work at the Department for International Development. The logo
for UK Aid was down to her, as was the audit of all the money that was given out to everyone; I cited that to some students I spoke to in the House. I thank her for her excellent work on that.

I will put together my hon. Friends the Members for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey), for Warrington North (Helen Jones) and for Liverpool, Riverside (Dame Louise Ellman) as they make me think of Donald Dewar. He said that he could never get selected and then when he finally did, and was elected to the House, he was confronted by people who beat him. Those three Members all beat me; I was runner-up to all three of them.

My hon. Friend the Member for Warrington North has made a huge contribution to the Petitions Committee; it is now a very important part of the work we do here and she rightly paid tribute to the Clerks of the Committee.

What can I say about the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Sir David Lidington)? He was an absolutely fantastic Leader of the House. I do not have time to do justice to the work that he has done here. He started out as a special adviser to Douglas Hurd and I keep saying, “Where are those members of the Conservative party like Douglas Hurd, like the right hon. Gentleman and indeed like Douglas Hurd’s son, the right hon. Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd)?” They are all going, and all are incredible public servants. The right hon. Member for Aylesbury was very kind to me when I first became shadow Leader of the House and we had very important conversations that we knew were not going anywhere. He made an important point for us to take forward for the future—we must ensure that this House moves forward. I hope he will continue to play an active role in public life because he is needed.

The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) was a Health Minister when I visited him and asked him to take up the cause of John’s campaign with Nicci Gerrard, Julia Jones and Francis Wheen, which was to allow family members to visit people in hospital who have dementia. Nicci Gerrard found that her father did not have an opportunity for interaction with his family—perhaps just playing a game of chess—and that that had a detrimental effect. When the right hon. Gentleman was a Minister he facilitated that opportunity for visiting.

The right hon. Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) was an outstanding Minister and an outstanding parliamentarian, and is an outstanding human being. Oh, I am not the right person to be doing this, given my past record of breaking down. I do not know what we will do without him. He has been absolutely fantastic. We walked arm in arm to St Margaret’s church when we paid tribute to Jo Cox. It was a very special day, and I will never forget his kindness. He talks about kindness; he is a really decent person. As he has said to me, his constituency is lucky as it has two MPs.

I will turn now to the right hon. Member for Aylesbury (Sir David Lidington). I should not have been in the Lobby with him, but he was in the Lobby with me and I know how deeply he struggled with voting the way he did. He voted for his country rather than his party; he put his personal loyalties aside and made sure that he did that for his country. He will be a fantastic loss. The sad thing about this is that we now see how wonderful everyone is, in the way they speak and the stories they tell. He is truly an honourable gentleman.

I have watched the hon. Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) nurse other hon. Members in this House when she was a vice-chair of the Tory party; she has been an assiduous vice-chair. She has been very kind to her colleagues and I know that she has been an excellent Minister. All the replies I have received from her have been absolutely fantastic, and she will be missed. Her manner is a gentle one, but she has a lot of strength. I know that her point about the Official Report and what we can do in that regard will be taken forward, and I am happy to work with the Leader of the House on that.

My hon. Friend the Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) has done some great work in the Commonwealth Parliamentary Association, and I hope she continues to do that, along with her work with universities and higher education. She, too, will be missed.

The hon. Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) is right about mental health care, and I hope that he continues to work on this important policy. He is also right about free TV licences for the over-75s; I am glad that he said that.

Turning to my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg): yes, we were all up for Portillo. He and I met a long time ago when we were going down to the Labour party conference. At that time, there was a section 28, which has now completely disappeared, so we know that politics can change and that we can make a difference.

The hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) has been a wonderful colleague. We have worked well together on hospital issues and he will certainly be remembered for his work for the Francis report. He has also been a champion for getting funds for the NHS. I also want to thank him for introducing me to Bananagrams, which is like Scrabble without the arguments.

The struggle that my hon. Friend the Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce) had to become a Labour candidate has turned her into an absolutely exemplary Member of Parliament, and her life story has shown why she will be missed; her strength and her
story are absolutely fantastic. Andrew, who works for me, is a constituent of hers, and he says that she is a fantastic MP. Sadly, she has chosen to be an MP no longer; she wants to be with her family.

The right hon. Member for Arundel and South Downs made a speech that was something of an emergency intervention. We are sorry to see him go, as he has been absolutely fantastic and a really assiduous Minister. I asked a colleague why the right hon. Gentleman was in the Chamber for this debate, and now we know. He had seven minutes to set out his case, which might be slightly more than he had for his maiden speech. It is true that he does have a very nice constituency.

It is good to see my hon. Friend the Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) back here. He has been through some really difficult times, but he has always worked with, for and on behalf of his constituents, wherever he has been. I wish him well with his new family and his new post.

My hon. Friend the Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Paul Farrelly) has done some sterling work on the Digital, Culture, Media and Sport Committee. Finally, I just want to say to the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), because this is a pre-recess Adjournment debate, that I must make a bid for Southend to get city status.

As this is the final day, I want to thank everyone. I want the Clerk of the House to pass down to everyone in his directorate our thanks for all the work they have done. I thank all the Clerks who, during difficult times, have given us excellent advice. I also want to thank all those in the Official Report, the Library and the Tea Room, the cleaning and catering staff, the Speaker’s Office and the post room. I post something here at seven o’clock and it arrives in Walsall the next day. I thank all our staff, including my Chief Whip, the Whips and Luke and Simon. We have the most amazing, talented people in this House who will no longer be here, and I hope that they will think about serving their country. I want to thank them for all the work they have done, and I want to wish every hon. Member all the best for their campaigns.

6.49 pm

The Leader of the House of Commons (Mr Jacob Rees-Mogg): It is very humbling to close this debate. I have worked out that there is over 540 years of experience in the Members who are standing down and if you place that end to end, I think that gets us back to the middle of the reign of the first Queen Elizabeth. It is an extraordinary degree of experience and political contribution. Mr Speaker, this is my first opportunity to congratulate you as you take the Chair. I think of all the work, and all the restoration and renewal, that you are going to do, both to the buildings and to our culture, which I think we are all looking forward to.

Like the right hon. Lady, at the end of a Session I thank, on behalf of all Members, the staff of the House, the members’ staff, security staff, the Doorkeepers, the civil servants and all those who keep the show on the road and are always here when we need them. Gratitude to the staff came through in all the speeches that were made, including that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Ruislip, Northwood and Pinner (Mr Hurd), who has hereditary staff taken on from his father.

I think that that is unusual, but it nonetheless shows the commitment of staff to this House, and I pay compliment to him while I am mentioning his staff.

Now it is my privilege to go through the Members who have spoken. I have nine minutes to do it, so forgive me for being brief. I am saving up one or two for the end. The right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) has been such a fantastic servant of this House. Running the Standards and Privileges Committee was a very hard job to do and his non-Oscar speech was better than most Oscar speeches.

I am not sure whether my right hon. Friend the Member for Wantage (Mr Vaizey) is retiring—maybe, maybe not—but his protection of the arts and his service are noble. His point about technology and the economy is fundamental.

Dare I say that the hon. Member for Vauxhall (Kate Hoey) is every Tory’s favourite socialiast, though I think the word “socialist” may be unfair in her case? I find that I agree with her on almost everything, so either I have moved to the left at some point mysteriously or she has moved some way to the right. She will be enormously missed. I loved her comment that there is always tradition for a reason, which is practically my motto, so I very much agreed with that.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Sevenoaks (Sir Michael Fallon) served four Prime Ministers and very kindly invited me to speak at Chartwell. One of the greatest honours that I have ever had was to speak in the home of perhaps our greatest ever Prime Minister. My right hon. Friend shows great kindness to new Members, which is perhaps little known, but it also makes one think about fate. I supported him to be Chairman of the Treasury Committee, which, by great good fortune, he did not get but went on to a glittering Cabinet career instead, which was probably better all round. My noble Friend Lord Tyrie got the Treasury Committee, which he served with great distinction.

We heard the tributes to the right hon. Member for Cynon Valley (Ann Clwyd)—I probably massacred my pronunciation—with the tributes to our previous Speaker. I do not know the right hon. Lady enormously well, but it became so clear during those tributes that she is loved across the House and must be one of the most popular Members for her work in favour of peace and human rights and to stop child abuse. I salute her on behalf of the whole House for what she has done.

I have a compliment for my right hon. Friend the Member for Putney (Justine Greening) from one of my civil servants which, if I may, I will read out:

“She has always taken the House very seriously and as a Minister, she impressed upon her Department the need to think constantly about Parliament, to make a case to Parliament and to convince Members across the House that the Department was doing the right thing.”

I think that that is a noble tribute and it has not come from me; it is not a political tribute but is from the civil servants with whom she worked. I so agree with her in her efforts to make social mobility a reality. That is something we should all want to do, and I am glad she is going to continue to work on that.

The hon. Member for West Bromwich West (Mr Bailey) first contested a seat at the age of 24, which is a very young age at which to contest a seat. He has been a distinguished Member of this House and is still very
passionate about what he believes in, about what he wants to do and about his commitment to Select Committees, which is of importance to the whole House.

The right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) showed in his final few words his amazing campaigning zeal. Though we all tease the Liberal Democrats, what we love about the true Liberals is that they believe in campaigning and they have strong principles for which they campaign. He has been such a champion for his constituency; he has been a champion for what it believes in and what it voted for.

My right hon. Friend the Member for North East Bedfordshire (Alistair Burt) is, I think, just one of the most gentlemanly, gentle and kindly Members of this House. He was enormously helpful to new MPs, and he probably has the best manners of anybody in this House.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) has been such a campaigner for what he chooses to believe in, and the advice he gave us at the end was brilliant. Seneca is normally only quoted by my right hon. Friend the Prime Minister, so it was an ambitious quotation. “Choose enemies carefully,” has a touch of steel about it, “Stay out of the bars,” has a touch of realism about it and we know, “Never forget your constituency base,” only too well, particularly as the election looms. We hope that we have not forgotten that in recent years.

My hon. Friend the Member for South Ribble (Seema Kennedy) made a brief point of order. It was her first point of order and, like all points of order, it was an ambitious quotation. “Choose enemies carefully,” has a touch of steel about it, “Stay out of the bars,” has a touch of realism about it and we know, “Never forget your constituency base,” only too well, particularly as the election looms. We hope that we have not forgotten that in recent years.

The hon. Member for Warrington North (Helen Jones) made the most charming speech and reminded us about the Tea Room staff, who look after us so extraordinarily well at all hours. She has the one job in this place that I once wanted, which is Chair of the Petitions Committee. I was on the Procedure Committee to set it up, and I am afraid that I had my eyes on the post and then it became an Opposition post. When I mentioned to the Whips that I was keen on it, I think they thought that it had better be an Opposition post, and the hon. Lady has run that brilliant and important Committee with great panache.

The right hon. Member for Broadland (Mr Simpson) lamented the decline of old Etonians as Members of the House of Commons. I do sympathise with that position, and I am glad he made the point. I thought it might have been a little bit too much coming from me, but coming from him I am allowed, I think, to reinforce it. He is a great Tory Member, a great supporter of Tory Members, and a teacher of Tory Members with his fabulous book list, which he regularly sends round. I hope that he will continue to do so, because his reading list is always interesting. I would also highlight his work for the Commonwealth War Graves Commission, which is valued by everybody.

I cannot understand why the hon. Member for Wrexham (Ian C. Lucas) is retiring. He made a political commentary of importance, and I think he should stand at the next election and bring those points back to the House. I urge him to change his mind.

My hon. Friend the Member for Truro and Falmouth (Sarah Newton) is the kindest lady in the House of Commons. She has been a friend towards me since we were elected at the same time, even when we have disagreed, and I love her confidence in Hansard. Hansard is so brilliant. Not only does it make a verbatim report, but it improves one’s English. It takes out all the split infinitives. I have only one disagreement with it, and that is that it thinks that “Government” is a plural, and I think it is a singular. My hon. Friend’s suggestion that Hansard should do even more work got nods and smiles from the Hansard representatives, so that will happen.

With all its heritage, the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) has a wonderful city to represent. She called the Library staff the unsung heroes, and we must sing more to the Library staff. There must be a tune for the parliamentary choir.

My hon. Friend the Member for North Devon (Peter Heaton-Jones) is a wonderful champion of local service. He will be missed, and his views on the BBC are noted.

Turning to the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), we all remember the Portillo moment. I had not realised that it was up there with the moon landings and the release of Nelson Mandela, but it was very humble of him—there has been humility in so many contributions—to say that that was based on a poll of readers of The Observer and Channel 4 viewers.

The Health and Social Care (Safety and Quality) Act 2015 that my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) presented is of great importance, and I support his campaign for religious freedom and freedom of speech. I hope that his work will be continued when he is no longer in the House.

The most touching and moving speech of the day was from the hon. Member for Erith and Thamesmead (Teresa Pearce). I have hardly been more moved by a speech in this House. On that basis, I know that she will be missed. What she said about historical institutional abuse was really very shocking—what an extraordinary thing for her family to have coped with.

I am glad that my right hon. Friend the Member for Arundel and South Downs (Nick Herbert) is supporting the PM. I am sorry that he has decided to leave at short notice.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Barrow and Furness (John Woodcock) on the new baby, and I say to the hon. Member for Newcastle-under-Lyme (Paul Farrelly) that 31 votes is enough.

I briefly want to mention my right hon. Friend the Members for Derbyshire Dales (Sir Patrick McLoughlin) and for Aylesbury (Sir David Lidington) and, of course, the House, the hon. Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound). What brilliant people we are losing. My right hon. Friend the Member for Derbyshire Dales put me through to the candidates list. I would not be here without him, so he has that resting upon his conscience, but what a fine and distinguished career he has had. He is one of the true fantastic figures of the House. I clashed with my right hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Aylesbury over Europe, but he is so courteous and so well informed and his arms never stop moving, which is fantastic. I will finish with our comedian: what will we do without him?

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered matters to be raised before the forthcoming Dissolution.
Mr Speaker: Before we come to the petitions, I would just like to say that I am losing many friends in this House who are stepping down. I say to Members on all sides that you have been great parliamentarians. I will not name you all—that is for others to do—but I thank you for the privilege of working with you. I wish you well for the future. My door is open if you ever need to come back. Please keep in touch.

PETITIONS

Human Rights in Kashmir

7.1 pm

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in your place, Mr Speaker.

I started a petition earlier this year on the situation in Indian-administered Kashmir. The situation has deteriorated further since the petition’s wording was agreed, and it is with great urgency that I present the petition to the House on this, the last sitting day of the Parliament.

The petition has been signed by 1,608 people, in addition to the 250 people who signed it online.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of the UK,

Declares that the security situation in Kashmir remains unacceptable with continued human rights violations; further that recent events, particularly around the Indian General Election, have seen an increase in violence and deaths in the region.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to put further pressure on the Indian Government to resolve the long running dispute; and further to commit to working with both parties to encourage dialogue to deliver a resolution to the status of the region; and further to support development in the region; and further to support calls for self-determination for the Kashmiri people by empowering those who live in Kashmir to determine their own future through the ballot box.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Outstanding work to Loachbrook Estate

Fiona Bruce (Congleton) (Con): I rise to present a petition from residents of the Loachbrook estate in Somerford, Congleton. It asks for the completion of outstanding works to this estate by the developer, Bovis Homes, and is supported by more than 100 residents, representing well over a third of households on the estate.

I recently visited the Loachbrook estate to see these outstanding works and therefore fully support my constituents. Residents have been pressing for their completion for some time and are concerned that some may be dangerous, particularly to children.

This is not the only estate in my constituency where works have been left incomplete for too long after residents have bought new homes. This is unacceptable and I hope the petition serves to highlight local concerns about this issue more widely.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Congleton,

Declares that the Petitioners call for the completion of outstanding landscaping, drainage, fencing, footpath and clearance works to the Loachbrook Estate.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges Bovis Homes to complete works by the end of this year.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Frigate named HMS Cornwall

Sarah Newton (Truro and Falmouth) (Con): There is hardly a family in my constituency that is not proudly associated with the Navy or the merchant navy. The Royal Fleet Auxiliary ships are based and maintained in Falmouth, along with the ocean survey vessel HMS Scott. I am delighted that one of the new batch 2 river-class offshore patrol vessels has been named HMS Tamar and will be attached to the port of Truro. All five of these new offshore patrol vessels will be maintained by A&P. Seven ships of the Royal Navy have been named HMS Cornwall after the Duchy of Cornwall. The first was launched in 1692 and broken up in 1761, and the last was launched in 1985 and decommissioned in 2011. Commanders and crew of all the HMS Cornwalls served with distinction, and I want to enable a new generation of Cornish people the opportunity to serve and support the Royal Navy.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Truro & Falmouth,

Declares that one of the new Type 31e General Purpose Frigates should be named HMS Cornwall.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure this is done.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Climate Change

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): I am delighted that you are in your rightful place, Mr Speaker.

The residents of York, who have sent me to this place, are deeply disturbed about the environment and climate crisis, the loss of species and habitats and the impact that has on our biodiversity and human race, whether flood or famine, drought or conflict, poverty or migration. I support their call for a climate emergency Bill. There is no planet B—we must care for the one we have.

The petition states:

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to introduce a Climate Emergency Bill to set out in detail as to how the United Kingdom will play its full roll nationally and globally to meet its commitments made in Paris in 2016, and to ensure it overhauls its consumption of all resources to end the climate and environmental crisis and build a sustainable world.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Following is the full text of the petition:

[The petition of residents of York,

Declares that the Government must now prioritise the climate and environmental emergency since there is no time to waste as each day global warming is causing irreversible ecological degradation, which is having untold damage on our biodiversity, on the survival of species losing their habitats and the human race, now facing floods and famine, conflict and migration as a result or climate change; further that if we do not act now to cut our consumption, to clear up our air pollution, to use renewable energy, to cut plastics and to transform our transport system, it will be too late.]
The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to introduce a Climate Emergency Bill to set out in detail as to how the United Kingdom will play its full role nationally and globally to meet its commitments made in Paris in 2016, and to ensure it overhauls its consumption of all resources to end the climate and environmental crisis and build a sustainable world.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Dispute in Kashmir

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): Mr Speaker, I rise for what is probably the last time for some time, for a number of reasons, to speak on behalf of my constituents about a matter of grave concern to them. We had thought we might have a bit longer to gather signatures, but the calling of a general election and my impending maternity leave have put paid to that. However, we are a community that has long been concerned about the situation in Kashmir.

The petition states:

The petition of residents of Walthamstow, Declares that the dispute in Kashmir should be resolved peacefully. The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the UK Government to use its international standing to encourage India to engage in a comprehensive and sustained dialogue process with its neighbour Pakistan to resolve the Kashmir dispute, and urge the international community to play its role in securing a just and peaceful resolution of the Kashmir dispute in accordance with the aspirations of the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

And the petitioners remain, etc.

Special Educational Needs and Disabilities (Suffolk)

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

7.10 pm

Sandy Martin (Ipswich) (Lab): May I, Mr Speaker, add my congratulations to those already given in respect of your elevation, both metaphorically and physically, to the speakership?

Suffolk has a greater than average number of special educational needs and disability assessment cases going to tribunal; poor communication between providers and with parents; a lack of specialist placements; an inadequate resource in the Norfolk and Suffolk NHS Foundation Trust, which is supposed to provide mental health services; insufficient respite services; a growing gap between the provision described in education, health and care plans and what is actually provided; an acute shortage of autistic spectrum disorder provision; and an overall lack of staff and funding to address these issues, either in mainstream education or in specialist provision.

Since the revisit from Ofsted in January this year, and its report in February, little seems to have been done to hold Suffolk to any action plan that might deal with the failings identified. There has been no increase in monitoring since the failed revisit and no appreciable changes in senior management. Mental health services—or the lack of them—continue to cause distress to young people and their parents, and young people are harming themselves or falling into greater mental health need while they wait for support that does not come.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): First, may I, too, publicly congratulate you, Mr Speaker, on your election as the Speaker of the House? It was a great pleasure to watch that.

The hon. Gentleman is absolutely right that this issue is critical, not only for him and his constituents but for me and mine, and the Minister has responsibility for it. The time allocated for direct contact time with educational psychologists is just 15 hours a year for pupils at one primary in Northern Ireland. For children dealing with anxiety and other social issues, that is simply not enough. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that the provision of support and early intervention in respect of social anxiety issues can positively impact lifelong mental health, and reduce the need for further intervention in high schools at a greater cost? In other words: do it now, do it early.

Sandy Martin: The hon. Gentleman is absolutely correct; he has put his finger right on the main point.

Two days ago, in response to the news that I had secured this debate, I received an email from a distressed parent. She says:

"My son has been out of school for 3 years in December. He was signed off by our consultant paediatrician as medically unfit for mainstream school. He has an Education & Health Care Plan. He has all the paperwork to state he has autism with a pathological demand avoidance profile but he cannot sit through the formal assessment as it runs for too long and he finds it too difficult to cope in the situation.

I have contacted the local authority so many times with regard to providing my son with an education; I have put in formal complaints and yet he still has no education."
I applied to the tribunal last December as the Local Authority insisted in his Education Health Care Plan that mainstream schooling was suitable for him, but they simultaneously refused to name a school he could go to.

The tribunal have made numerous orders ordering the Local Authority to name a school for my son but these have all been ignored.

We went to the tribunal last Tuesday, 29th October, at which the Judge told the Local Authority that they need to name a school on his education and health care plan and that the tribunal had to be adjourned until 13th December because of this, adding more of a delay to my son getting an education. He is now 12 years old.

My son is still without an education and we are in limbo.

My son deserves the correct education but he has been thoroughly let down by the education system. The strain of fighting the system tires you out but you still have to keep going. It should not be like this—every child has the right to an education. We keep being told that it is not the label that counts, but the child’s needs. Well we know our son needs an education but we cannot access any support for him to get that education because he doesn’t seem to have the right label.”

I had already secured this debate when that message was sent to me. The reason why I applied for the debate was that parent after parent has written to me, emailed me, met with me at my surgeries, and invited me to visit their child’s school or visit the school that their child would be going to if they had enough support in place, or the school that would be ideal for the child, but which has no more capacity.

James Cartlidge (South Suffolk) (Con): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate, but before I make my point, may I congratulate you, Mr Speaker, for the first time on your appointment? I think you will be a brilliant arbiter in this Chamber.

To the hon. Gentleman, who is also my neighbour, may I just say that I, too, have cases in my constituency that are very challenging? Does he accept that underneath all of this is resource, that it is the long-term funding formula that has caused us to receive such a small allocation, and that by fixing that we actually have at least a chance to see significant increases in SEND funding in Suffolk?

Sandy Martin: I thank the hon. Gentleman and agree that underlying all of this is a lack of resource, but I think the problem is not the formula, but the overall lack of resource.

I have met parents whose child had been placed in another county hundreds of miles away. I have met parents whose child is taken to school every day, but then regularly leaves the premises without any sort of supervision to prevent them from leaving. I have met parents who desperately want their child to receive some specialist support, but who believe that he or she is just left in the corner of a classroom for most periods because the school does not have the resources to provide the extra care required.

For years, resources for child mental health, school health visitors, children’s centres, mainstream schools, county educational services, school transport and family social workers have been more and more tightly rationed, and the situation for children and young people with special educational needs and disabilities has suffered as a result of all of these cuts.

For children on the autistic spectrum, the situation is dire. It can often take years to get a diagnosis. Child and adolescent mental health services often tell parents that they need to get an initial assessment from the school first, but in most cases the school has nobody on the staff who is qualified to make such an assessment and will pass the buck back to CAMHS. In some cases, such as the one I mentioned at the start, the child will never be in the school to be assessed, because one of the defining characteristics of many mental disabilities is the refusal to submit to stressful situations.

Even once a child is properly assessed and their needs are understood, there is nothing like the necessary range of provision for those needs in Suffolk, and in particular, in my constituency of Ipswich. I am not a supporter of free schools as a model for educational delivery, but I still supported a free school for children on the autistic spectrum simply because there is a crying need for that provision and there does not seem to be any other way of obtaining it. Such a school has still not been built.

It is not just a problem for children with mental disabilities. There are 637 deaf children in Suffolk. Far too many of them are not receiving an adequate education. Ofsted and the Care Quality Commission carried out a local area SEND inspection in 2016 and found significant failings. The revisit in January of this year found that, in this area of provision, there was still not sufficient progress. It is not surprising that little progress has been made for deaf children. The numbers of trained teachers of the deaf in Suffolk have fallen by 8% in the past six years. The county is now trying to change the way that social care support is provided for deaf children, but it is not involving the families in the design of the new provision. “Nothing about us without us” is not just a woke slogan—if we do not include service providers in the redesign of a service, we will not be able to understand the problems and frustrations that have led to the need to redesign the service in the first place. The problem is not just confined to children who are profoundly deaf. There is very little provision for speech and language therapy in schools in Ipswich, and the few schools that were able to provide it in the past have had to think very carefully about whether they can continue to do so because of the inadequacy of the funding regime.

In many cases, parents are being forced to seek private provision because they cannot obtain anything through the educational system or the NHS. Both our educational system and our NHS were founded on the principle that education and health should not just be the preserve of the rich. It is, quite frankly, appalling that whether a child gets the support that they need to lead a satisfying and productive life can depend on whether their parents have sufficient resources to buy them the help that they need.

The Ofsted report from February this year is not encouraging. It identifies three areas of serious weakness that were all previously identified in 2016. The first is the poor timeliness, integration and quality of SEND statutory assessments and plans. This includes when statements of special educational needs are transferred to education, health and care plans, and the delivery of subsequent individual packages of support. The second is the lack of local understanding of the support available and the poor quality of the local offer, including access to child and adolescent mental health services support...
across the area. This leads to high levels of parental complaints and anxiety. In this section of the report, Ofsted particularly points out the long waiting times for assessment or autism spectrum diagnoses, and the deficit hyperactivity disorder, and states that current pathways do not support best practice in line with National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidance. The third area of weakness is the lack of joint working to monitor, quality assure and maximise the effectiveness of the work undertaken to improve outcomes for children in a diverse range of settings and circumstances. In all three cases, Ofsted says leaders have not made sufficient progress to address the serious weaknesses.

Underfunded schools, a failing mental health service in Suffolk and a lack of adequate leadership have all come together to produce wholly inadequate SEND provision in Ipswich. This is not just about the provision of nice-to-have services. It is about us failing people and leaving them with ruined lives.

Let me describe some of the situations in which young people in my constituency have found themselves. One student was transferred from a statement of special educational needs to an education, health and care plan. The plan is supposed to give access to medical and social care services as well as appropriate education, yet the entire preparation work for the plan fell to teachers who did not have the qualifications, time or support to provide such a plan. This is one of the areas that have been assessed as failing by Ofsted.

There is also a student in my constituency who has profound difficulties, and would respond well to music therapy, music, and other arts stimuli, but who is being taught to read or write, instead of interacting with the children.

Mainstream schools do not have the resources to deal with the issue. Teachers are already near breaking point, and some are leaving the profession as a result. Analysis by the school cuts coalition shows that 94% of schools in Ipswich still have less income per pupil in real terms than in 2015—£290 per pupil less. The results-driven competition between schools leads to decisions that particularly hit SEND pupils. The local authority does not have the resources to deal with the issue. The invaluable county educational advisory service, which used to be one of the jewels in Suffolk’s crown and led us to think that we were ahead of the curve in SEND provision in Suffolk, has all but disappeared. The county no longer has sufficient powers to properly regulate the schools. The main priorities, so let me begin by stressing that I know and recognise that some families and teachers are unhappy, and both I and the Department are committed to listening to them. While I am pleased that we have been able to secure an additional £780 million in high-needs funding for next year, we do realise that this is about much more than just money. I want to ensure that children and young people with SEND have the best chance in life and that the system supports them to do this. That is why we have recently launched the SEND review, which will look at how the system has evolved since 2014 and how it can be made better for all families.

About 1.3 million children have special educational needs. In Suffolk alone, 4,735 children and young people have education, health and care plans, and a further 11,369 are in receipt of SEND support for Suffolk schools. The Government are clear that our ambition for these children is exactly the same as it is for all children: we want them to reach their full potential in school and college and to find employment and lead happy and fulfilled lives. I have seen this happening in my own constituency. The 2018 Ofsted-CQC SEND inspection report for Wiltshire said:

“Young people are increasingly well supported as they move into adult life.”

In 2014, we introduced major reforms of the SEND system to improve and streamline the support provided to children and young people with SEND, and to put their needs, and those of their families, at the heart of the SEND system. Local authorities, clinical commissioning groups and education, health and care providers have all been working hard to implement the reforms, and we recently heard from the Education Committee that they remain “the right ones”. But it is important to note that most parents think that they get a lot of support through parent carer forums, which are providing a crucial voice in local SEND decision making.
The Ofsted and CQC inspections of SEND services will see all local areas in England inspected by 2021, and they have identified a range of strengths in the way that local areas are delivering the reforms. The reforms made it clear that SEND decision making must be informed by, and co-produced with, children, young people and parents, and we have played our part in securing that. We have invested heavily in the development of parent carer forums in every local authority, and forums have received £2.3 million in grant funding each year since the reforms were introduced. Every local authority has in place an information, advice and support service that provides impartial, free advice for families. We know from SEND inspections that in most local areas families really value that advice and support.

We know that most children with SEND are educated within mainstream schools and colleges, and we have committed to maintaining and developing still further an inclusive mainstream system. This really can work, as I have seen in my own constituency, where Abbeyfield School’s latest inspection showed that the experiences of their children are proving effective for all. So to support inclusion, my Department has awarded a two-year contract to the National Association of Special Educational Needs and University College London, on behalf of the Whole School SEND consortium, to help to embed SEND in school improvement and equip the workforce to deliver high-quality teaching across all areas of SEND.

As I said, I know and appreciate that there are concerns, particularly from parents, about the way that the reforms have been delivered across the country. While strengths have been reported in every local area, SEND inspections have also identified weaknesses in many local services. This does include Suffolk, whose inspection report was published in January 2017, as alluded to by the hon. Gentleman. That report identified issues with SEND leadership and governance, the timeliness and integration of needs assessment systems, and the poor quality of the local offer. Nobody, for one minute, is denying or underestimating the importance of those grave concerns. Where there have been concerns, we have worked with partners, including NHS England. Support and challenge are offered to all areas required to produce an action plan through regular advice and monitoring from the Department for Education and NHS England advisers and through access to funded training opportunities and resources.

**James Cartlidge:** My hon. Friend is right to be open and clear about the challenges that we face in Suffolk, but does she agree that it partly reflects the long-standing impact of the funding formula, which has given our county a very low share of overall funding? Can she assure me that we will not only provide extra funding next year but back SEND children in Suffolk in the years to come?

**Michelle Donelan:** I thank my hon. Friend, who has been an assiduous campaigner on this issue, as well as others. Of course it is important that we get the right resources and funding into areas, including Suffolk, so that they have the tools and ability to ensure that SEND children have the same opportunities, choices and chances in life.

I recognise that there have been problems in Suffolk, but I want to reassure the hon. Member for Ipswich that, despite what he said, we are monitoring progress closely. This remains a key priority for our Department. We will hold a formal progress review meeting later this month, to which stakeholders and parents will be invited. Despite what he said, Ofsted and the CQC highlighted several improvements since the original inspection, particularly in the area of governance and leadership, from which one would expect the rest to follow. Improvements were also found in access to speech and language therapy; positive work by outreach and inclusion services; activity to reduce exclusions; and the active role and contribution of the Suffolk parent carer forum in shaping the development of services.

Many areas are facing pressure on their high needs budgets, which the hon. Gentleman stressed. That is why we recently announced £780 million in additional high needs funding for next year, which is an increase of 12% compared with this year, bringing the total amount for supporting those in need to £7.2 billion. Every local authority will see an increase in high needs funding of at least 8% per head of population aged two to 18, with some seeing gains of up to 17% per head. In Suffolk, the provisional high needs funding allocation for 2020-21 is £75 million—a 17% per head increase, and a staggering amount, which I am sure the hon. Gentleman will welcome. In May 2019, we launched a call for evidence on financial arrangements for SEND and alternative provision. We are currently considering the responses and will look at the high needs formula in due course, to consider whether any changes are needed.

Creating the right number of school places in the right settings is a challenge. That is why I am pleased that Suffolk County Council is developing more than 800 new specialist education places between 2020 and 2025. That will include the establishment of three new specialist schools, up to 36 specialist units attached to mainstream schools and an in-county specialist setting for children with the most complex needs. As part of the capital programme, Suffolk will open a social, emotional and mental health school in Bury St Edmunds, which I know my hon. Friend, the Member for Bury St Edmunds (Jo Churchill) was instrumental in ensuring. It is expected that those schools will open across the next two to three years. Alongside Suffolk’s capital programme, through the DFE scheme, it is opening two special free schools in Ipswich.

The hon. Gentleman has raised some important concerns today, and I once again thank him for securing the debate. The Government have invested heavily in reforms of the system for SEND support, and local areas are all working hard to ensure that they are a great success. However, we know there is further to go, and we remain determined to tackle the issues that exist. That is one of the reasons why we announced the SEND review. The review will consider how the system can provide the highest quality of support to enable children and young people with SEND to thrive and to prepare for adulthood, including employment. It will ensure that quality of provision is the same across the country and that there is joined-up thinking across health, care and education services. Finally, it will ensure that public money is spent in an efficient and effective way to deliver for all children.

Mr Speaker, I am delighted to have the final word of this Parliament on my passion for education, which I have always said has the ability to transform lives for all.
children, including those with special educational needs. I must stress that I am committed to work relentlessly with my colleagues across the Government to ensure that the system delivers for all children—those in Suffolk and those up and down the country.

Question put and agreed to.

7.35 pm

House adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Monday 28 October 2019

[Stewart Hosie in the Chair]

Restoring Nature and Climate Change

4.30 pm

Daniel Zeichner (Cambridge) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered e-petition 254607 relating to restoring nature and climate change.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie, and an honour to introduce the petition on behalf of the Petitions Committee. It is timely because of the climate crisis we face, but also because it is a hot topic in Ambridge at the moment, for those who listen to “The Archers”. That is always a useful barometer for a certain part of public opinion.

The petition, which calls for natural climate solutions, such asrewilding, to be enacted to tackle the climate emergency, has been signed by around 110,000 people, including over 650 from my Cambridge constituency. It makes a series of important points and reads:

“Restore nature on a massive scale to help stop climate breakdown.
To avoid a climate emergency we need to act fast.
Rewilding and other natural climate solutions can draw millions of tonnes of CO2 out of the air through restoring and protecting our living systems. We call on the UK Government to make a bold financial and political commitment to nature’s recovery.
We need to limit global temperature rise to 1.5°C to avoid the catastrophic effects of climate breakdown. To do this we need both to reduce carbon emissions and to remove carbon from the atmosphere. By drawing down carbon, nature’s recovery can help us reach net carbon zero.

We have a chance for the UK to become a world leader in natural climate solutions. Those who manage our land and sea play a pivotal role and should be supported to come together to deliver carbon reductions.”

I doubt many—or even any—of us here would disagree with much in that statement. It is a topic that chimes with the public mood over the last year. From the school climate strikes, the Extinction Rebellion protests with the public mood over the last year. From the term “unspoiled” that some people apply to areas untouched by human intervention. There are certainly many—far too many—places that have been spoiled, polluted and harmed, but there are also examples of glorious and wonderful buildings and interventions, where people have achieved works of great beauty.

Henry Smith (Crawley) (Con): In that recognition of where humans can enhance our environment, will the hon. Gentleman join me in paying tribute to the Sussex Wildlife Trust and the wildlife trusts around the country that do so much to support our environment with innovative and practical solutions?

Daniel Zeichner: I suspect that many Members around the Chamber will have worked with their local wildlife trusts and seen the excellent work they do. Just a few weeks ago I was with the Wildlife Trust for Bedfordshire, Cambridgeshire & Northamptonshire releasing Nora the hedgehog into the wild, although Nora’s building was not one of the works of art I was about to reference in my great city of Cambridge.

Cambridge is full of fine examples of magnificent buildings and we are proud of them. They are often the work of previous generations, sometimes created in political and economic circumstances that we would not now accept. We can all point to examples across cultures and countries of magnificent interventions. My point is that we are not for or against nature, but with better scientific understanding of our impact on the wider environment, we now have the responsibility to act in a way that does no more harm and, where harm has been caused, take the opportunity to work with natural processes to secure improvement. That is my starting point.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): Kent Wildlife Trust, along with others, has a strategy of greening urban areas. Will the hon. Gentleman welcome its initiatives and others, such as that at Luton Junior School, in my constituency, which plans to build a green, living wall to help absorb pollution and improve the future health of the children at the school?

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Lady is correct; I suspect we will be hearing more examples of good work done by other wildlife trusts.

Sir Oliver Heald (North East Hertfordshire) (Con): I will say a word about the role of water and wetlands. The hon. Gentleman will know the example of Wicken Fen in Cambridgeshire and about the work that is being done to improve the wetlands towards Anglesey Abbey. We could do with more work like that around the country. In Hertfordshire, our chalk streams are suffering from over-abstraction. Do we not need a policy for water?

Daniel Zeichner: The right hon. and learned Gentleman is right. I am about to embark on a tour of wetlands; Wicken Fen will be one of them. This summer we have seen some particular problems with a number of streams drying up, so we need a plan for water.

Bambos Charalambous (Enfield, Southgate) (Lab): Is my hon. Friend aware of the 2018 report by the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change and the 2019 report by the Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services that...
show that nature and climate crisis are inextricably linked? The IPBES report says that 1 million species globally are at risk of extinction. Does he agree that nature-based solutions are a fundamental way of stopping climate change and preventing the extinction of species?

Daniel Zeichner: My hon. Friend is right; I will come to some of those points later.

Caroline Lucas (Brighton, Pavilion) (Green): The hon. Gentleman is being generous with his time. It is great that we are all paying tribute to our local wildlife trusts; I will put in a word for the wonderful Sussex Wildlife Trust. Does he agree that we need urgent action? Ministers could make a decision right now to ban the burning of blanket bog, ending the release of huge amounts of emissions that could otherwise be captured by peat. When we consider that globally peatlands can store more carbon than rain forests, we need to be doing much more and not burning them.

Sir Oliver Heald: Only if they are wet; they have to be wet.

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Lady is right, as is the right hon. and learned Gentleman, who spoke from a sedentary position. Later in my speech, I will make that point.

Stella Creasy (Walthamstow) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is exceedingly generous in taking interventions in this important debate. I pay tribute to the Walthamstow Wetlands—I hope they will be on his tour—and to my local authority, which has planted 5,000 trees in the last year alone in Waltham Forest.

The hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) is right when she says that we need to look at what Government can do. Many of us are interested in ideas about carbon pricing and how we can further incentivise rewilding as part of tackling climate change. Frankly, it is not enough to leave it to local communities and local authorities, which do individually brilliant things; in this time of climate emergency, we should ask national Government to incentivise rewilding. Does my hon. Friend have a view on that?

Daniel Zeichner: I had a wonderful day out in Walthamstow with my partner earlier this year, when we came to see some of the wonderful things that have been done there. On the point of urgency, my hon. Friend is right. The conclusion to my speech will lay down the challenge to the Minister about the degree of urgency we face, which I am sure he will respond to.

Sir Greg Knight (East Yorkshire) (Con): Does the hon. Gentleman agree that any rewilding scheme is far more likely to be successful if it is pursued and taken along with the consent of the local community and local landowners?

Daniel Zeichner: The right hon. Gentleman is right; again, I will make that point in my speech. When we work together with local communities we can achieve much more.

The petition specifically talks about rewilding and natural climate solutions, and I want to draw on a number of examples and points that experts on those subjects have raised with me. The organisation Rewilding Britain describes the issue as being about people reconnecting with nature, wildlife returning and habitats expanding, while communities flourish with new opportunities. That starts from the principle that natural processes drive outcomes, and that rewilding is to go where nature takes it, with long-term benefits for future generations. I will give some examples, beginning close to home.

There are some wonderful long-term projects such as the National Trust’s visionary project to restore wetlands around Wicken Fen in Cambridgeshire, which has been mentioned. That project has been ably promoted over many years by Tony Juniper, who now chairs Natural England. He is a highly regarded environmentalist. I will mention in passing that he was my Green party opponent in the 2010 general election in Cambridge. We spent a long evening at the count together after he had run a brilliant, vigorous and exciting campaign, which, sadly for him, secured only a few thousand votes, marginally behind me. I came in a disappointing third. I remind colleagues gently that election outcomes are not always exactly as anticipated. Tony has recently written extensively about the social and economic benefits of a nature-centric green new deal, which would unlock benefits such as public health improvements, both physical and mental. It is a programme that I strongly approve of.

However, it is not just land policy that attracts the attention of rewilders. We need to look to the oceans as well.

Stephen Gethins (North East Fife) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman has touched on something that is important in our approach to the debate. When we talk about rewilding and climate change, we often talk about the challenges. Would not it sometimes be better to talk about the opportunities, for jobs, the economy and the social fabric?

Daniel Zeichner: I am slightly alarmed at the unanimity that is breaking out in the Chamber today. The hon. Gentleman is right and many of us have noticed that in the last period the green economy has survived times of recession much more effectively than the rest of the economy.

To return to the subject of the oceans, the securing of no-fish zones in oceans can allow marine habitats to recover from the effects of bottom trawling and scallop dredging. An example is the no-take zone in Lamlash bay in Scotland. That is beautifully outlined by Rewilding Britain on its website. The issues are not always straightforward. In my area, the Cambridge Independent reported last week that Cambridgeshire County Council’s goal of reaching net zero carbon emissions is going to be more challenging than originally thought, as peatland emissions will be included in Government calculations from next year. Cambridge University Science and Policy Exchange, which strongly advocates nature-based solutions, identified—as the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) pointed out—that peatland is a significant contributor to CO₂ emissions in Cambridgeshire. Adam Barnett of the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds tells me that that is a crucial issue. Consequently, the
RSPB and other organisations rightly want to ban the burning of peat bogs, which releases carbon and is extremely damaging to the atmosphere. I hope that we shall get a response on that from the Minister. I know that questions have been put to Ministers about it before.

I have mentioned just some of the complex range of issues that there are to consider. The staff serving the Petitions Committee were kind enough to set up an engagement event on the topic in Cambridge last week, and we had an extremely well-informed roundtable with experts in my constituency. I record my thanks to the Clerks to the Committee for their work on it. Our discussion took place at the premises of the Cambridge Conservation Initiative in the iconic David Attenborough building, a conservation campus that is home to organisations that promote the natural world, such as the RSPB, Flora & Fauna International and BirdLife International. There, I was privileged to meet Dr Mike Rands, the executive director of the Cambridge Conservation Initiative, and Dr Andy Clements, the director of the British Trust for Ornithology, who shared with me their insights on natural restoration. Dr Clements hammered home the point that data and monitoring of natural activity are crucial. We must know the state of affairs to be able to improve it.

**Mr Sheerman:** My hon. Friend has the great advantage that I have, of having a superb university in his constituency. Are universities, in partnership, doing enough in terms of leadership? I find that many universities do research and do not share with their local communities and groups, or even local government. Could more be done? Of course, many universities, such as Cambridge, are large landowners.

**Daniel Zeichner:** As ever, my hon. Friend makes an important point. The University of Cambridge provides global leadership, but I occasionally point out to it that the link with the local community could be improved. Universities need to be close to their communities.

**Sir Oliver Heald:** On that point, Professor Sir David King, the former master of Emmanuel College and emeritus professor at Cambridge, who has been the Government’s chief scientific adviser on this, has been a strong advocate of carbon sinks.

**Daniel Zeichner:** Indeed, Sir David is of course one of my constituents and I happily canvassed him recently. Cambridge is a wonderful place in which to canvass, I assure the House.

**Mr Sheerman:** It is very flat.

**Daniel Zeichner:** Cambridgeshire is not as flat as all that, if you cycle around. However, in answer to the intervention of the right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald)—yes; some important leadership, and extraordinary plans and ideas, are coming from such places as the University of Cambridge, about the dramatic interventions we might make to tackle climate change.

To return to the topic of data, there are many ways in which we can assess what is happening in the world. I was reminded, during the discussion we were having, of the work of immensely important organisations such as the Bumblebee Conservation Trust; its chief executive, the inspiring Gill Perkins, has pointed that out to me before. Its annual “BeeWalk” involves volunteer “BeeWalkers” walking the same fixed route once a month between March and October, counting the bumblebees seen and identifying them by species and caste where possible. That is important, and I suspect we are also all familiar with the hugely popular and important annual RSPB “Big Garden Birdwatch”. Those are just some of the ways in which we can monitor and assess what is going on. As hon. Members have suggested, such public engagement is vital. By encouraging each other to monitor the world around us, we shall, I am convinced, become better informed in our efforts to protect it.

During our discussion in Cambridge, the importance of data and evidence was further highlighted by Hazel Thornton of the UN Environment Programme World Conservation Monitoring Centre. She told me that out of 337 common interventions that it had assessed, only about a third were evidence based. That is a striking statistic. I suspect that all too often we do things that we think are helpful because they are what we have always done, without really knowing whether they have the desired outcomes, or—worse—whether there is a risk of unintended consequences.

Hazel Thornton advocated Government support for open-access data and decision-making tools, which should include consideration of costs and local values. She also called for Government funding for a long-term evidence monitoring system. I have considerable sympathy because, important as voluntary efforts are, they need to be complementary to rigorous scientific recording.

Dr Clements highlighted the need to tackle the carbon crisis and biodiversity crisis together. He pointed out that in some ways the carbon crisis is simpler to communicate to the wider public. We can probably all remember the need to limit temperature rises to below 2°C, but the biodiversity crisis, which is just as crucial, is perhaps harder to explain in simple memorable terms that capture public attention.

Almost as we speak here, discussions in the main Chamber will have an impact on the ways forward. The Environment Bill and our wider future relationship with our European partners will both have a significant impact on the issues that we are debating. A point that has been much stressed in the many recent debates is that, were we to leave the European Union, that should not lead to the potential regression of existing environmental standards. Dr Clements emphasised that to me and, as Members would probably expect, there is near-universal agreement among those who are expert in the field. The combined power and influence of 28 states acting together should not be lost. It is a global climate crisis and we must tackle it collaboratively.

Sue Wells, of the Cambridge Conservation Forum, focused on the need to take oceans into account when making policy. She explained that marine issues could get left behind in comparison with terrestrial projects. Another issue that was highlighted locally was fenland projects. Roger Mitchell, of Fens for the Future, talked about the need for nature-based solutions to the carbon emissions of the fens, which we have already discussed.

All this suggests a wider picture. When developing our land for our needs—housing, transport, infrastructure—we must maintain a focus on natural capital and on nature-based solutions to carbon emissions. Whether in
planning flood diversions and defences with natural solutions, or in projects such as East West Rail, which affects my constituency, and the natural capital work there, we must focus on the environment alongside any development plans.

There are good examples of where past developments can be improved. Recently, I visited Anglian Water’s sewage treatment plant in Ingoldisthorpe, Norfolk, with the East of England all-party parliamentary group. We were all impressed with the work that had been done to create beautiful wetlands and increase local and regional biodiversity. The restored wetland removes the need for carbon-intensive, expensive nutrient-stripping techniques, while improving water quality; it is a great project led by the Norfolk Rivers Trust.

We must keep our focus on the environment when delivering investment for the future, and we must think long term. Sarah Smith of the Wicken Fen rewilding project told me the project has a 100-year plan to extend the nature reserve by 10 miles, as I mentioned earlier.

**Jonathan Reynolds** (Stalybridge and Hyde) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for giving way, as that allows me to put on record my tribute to the Cheshire Wildlife Trust, which runs the Eastwood nature reserve in Stalybridge. On the things that he has just mentioned, which I think we all agree with, does he agree that housing is perhaps the area that needs the biggest change? I see far too many generic, developer-led developments that have no relationship to the natural world around them. If we are serious about not just putting investment in, but changing how we do things, housing must be planned in a much better way with respect to the local environment. If we are serious about doing things such as garden villages, that could be the way, but I do not think the present approach will achieve the outcome he is quite ably describing.

**Daniel Zeichner**: My hon. Friend’s intervention takes us off into a different debate in some ways, but I absolutely agree with him. It is much to be regretted that the very high environmental standards for new build that were in place in 2010 are no longer there, but I am sure they can be restored—if not before Christmas, soon afterwards, perhaps.

I spoke before about long-term planning. While Wicken Fen may be looking 100 years ahead, I am not sure Parliament can look forward 100 hours at the moment, but we do need to commit to long-term natural restoration.

**Tracey Crouch**: Can we put on the record the importance and value of roadside nature reserves, which are often forgotten in the dynamic environment we live in? Many of our wildlife trusts work alongside their local authorities to keep our roadside nature reserves wild and keep those species living in that protected environment, but there is no statutory requirement for local authorities to invest in them. It is important that we remember the value of roadside nature reserves in the context of this debate.

**Daniel Zeichner**: The hon. Lady must be a mind reader, because that is my very next point. She makes an important point, because, as I was going to say, beyond those big long-term projects, there are quite simple things that can be done locally or individually. That was drawn to my attention by Olivia Norfolk, of Anglia Ruskin University, who said that simple solutions in urban environments to encourage nature restoration, such as not mowing road verges, can be important. However, she also argued that, while we can all act ourselves, we need urgent systemic changes to the way we run the country, and we cannot continue to export our costs overseas.

**Sir Peter Bottomley** (Worthing West) (Con): The hon. Gentleman’s exchange with my hon. Friend the Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) reminds me that when I served as Roads Minister in the 1980s, we planted over 1 million trees a year—they were not actually trees when they were planted, but many of them have grown into trees. Those nature reserves are very important, particularly if they can provide continuous habitat and corridors for animals to get around; it is not just about the foxes getting into town on the railways, but about providing a variety of planting that we do not often get in some managed forests.

**Daniel Zeichner**: I am grateful for that intervention. It must be a wonderful thing to be able to see that the trees that were planted then have now come to fruition. That is also an important point.

If we are to consider all these points alongside a future generation’s initiative, we need to make not only individual and cultural changes, but systemic, Government-led ones. Tom Maddox, of Natural Capital Hub and Flora & Fauna International, told me of the need to adopt a holistic approach, and in 2021—

**Caroline Lucas** rose—

**Daniel Zeichner**: I will just finish the sentence. In 2021, the UN Decade of Ecosystem Restoration starts—a huge opportunity. Let us beat the curve and adopt those radical and far-reaching changes now.

**Caroline Lucas**: I apologise for interrupting. I thought there was a semi-colon there, but perhaps there was not. I know the hon. Gentleman is concerned about an outbreak of unanimity, so in case that should happen, can I put it to him that natural climate solutions must be supported, but only in addition to, not instead of, rapid emission reductions in every part of the economy? Does he share my concern that Heathrow airport, for example, is pushing a set of ideas about peatland restoration as part of its so-called carbon-neutral growth plans, but not changing business as usual? We must not use natural climate solutions as a way to avoid real carbon reduction.

**Daniel Zeichner**: I am grateful to the hon. Lady; I am sure there is no danger of complete unanimity breaking out when she is in the room. She is right that, when it comes to the issue of Heathrow, there is certainly not likely to be unanimity. That is an important point, because sometimes—I am not saying this about that particular project—it is pretty clear that there is some greenwashing going on, and we must always be mindful of that.

I turn to the Government and ask for a couple of commitments—first, clear leadership and a commitment to implementing nature restoration measures, rather
than simply leaving them to the market, where simplistic short-term economic arguments too often win out. Yes, restoration can make absolute economic sense on a macro level, but individual actors need encouragement, education and direction on why they should change their behaviour. Targets and monitoring are vital there.

Secondly, as I suspect is often the way, I want to press for more ambition from the Government. The 25-year environment plan includes measures that would improve our natural environment, yes, but many would say that we should go much further. The commitment to restore 500,000 hectares, for example, is half what a single company has pledged in Indonesia. We should look at what others have pledged in the Bonn Challenge. The commitment to raise forest cover in England from 10% to 12% takes us from sixth lowest in Europe to eighth lowest, still behind Scotland and Wales. Most European countries have over one third of their land covered in forest. Belgium has a similar population density to us, but over twice the forest, so we can do more, and we can challenge ourselves further.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): I am glad to hear the hon. Gentleman pay tribute to the efforts of the Scottish Government, but does he agree that the efforts of organisations such as Network Rail hold them back? It is trying to cut down swathes of trees along the railway lines through my constituency, removing a nature corridor that is important to local people.

Daniel Zeichner: The hon. Lady is absolutely right and points to exactly the kind of trade-off that I was referring to. As a member of the Select Committee on Transport, I should be at this very moment questioning Mr Williams on this issue. She is right to draw attention to the many trees that are being destroyed.

Let me conclude with a voice from a future generation, because last week I received a letter from Maggie, a 10-year-old girl from a primary school in my constituency, and I would like to quote one or two of the things she said:

“Sir David Attenborough said that ‘nature recovery’ laws must be created to ensure ‘habitats are expanded and reconnected’. Please ask the Government to pass a law to protect our wildlife!”

She went on:

“Secondly, our wildlife is endangered by the plastic in the sea and us cutting down their homes. We also need to stop littering around our environment, fields and especially on the beach! To sum up, I need you to tell the government that they need to act now and my question for the government is: do you want to keep ruining animals’ lives, or do you want to save the animals and our world from climate change?”

I must say that in my political life I have rarely invoked Maggie, but today I hope the Minister will rise to the challenge of 21st-century Maggie and act to protect her, and our, future.

4.58 pm

David Tredinnick (Bosworth) (Con): Thank you for calling me first on this side of the Chamber, Mr Hosie. I declare an interest, in that I am a member of the Conservative Environment Network, and before that I was a member of the Tory Green Initiative in the 1980s. My commitment to the environment is sincere.

I congratulate the constituents of the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on their ingenuity in using a petition, which is a very unusual way of bringing their concerns to a Chamber of the House, formed, as it is, of general Members. I hope that those constituents will feel satisfied with the response they receive today from my right hon. Friend the Member for Richmond Park (Zac Goldsmith), who has done so much in the field of the environment, long before he was promoted to be a Minister.

I congratulate the Government on what they have done so far, particularly on setting carbon limits, dealing with deforestation and their work on plastics. Last year, I was in India, in Bangalore, and I was astonished by the amount of plastics there. This autumn, I was in Delhi, and I saw very little plastic. I asked my host why, and he said that they had taken action in India, and that had made a decisive difference.

The issue of carbon emissions goes beyond the countryside, and it has to be faced by the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs and others. During the Queen’s Speech debate, I drew it to the Health Secretary’s attention that the NHS’s carbon footprint in England is around 27 million tonnes of carbon dioxide equivalents, and suggested to him that all new hospitals and health facilities in this country should take carbon footprint into account. The carbon footprint is high and it takes into account health service buildings, but we also have to look at the carbon footprint of healthcare services and medicines; the carbon footprint is measured without taking into consideration the pharmaceutical products provided as medicines.

I refer colleagues to an article published last year by Agence France-Presse, which said that large numbers of pharmaceuticals had been found at levels dangerous for wildlife and the environment. It said:

“River systems around world are coursing with over-the-counter and prescription drug waste,”

which is extremely harmful. If this trend persists, the amount of pharmaceutical effluence leaching into waterways could increase by two thirds before 2050, according to scientists speaking at the European Geosciences Union conference in Vienna in April 2018. Francesco Bregoli, a researcher at the IHE Delft Institute for Water Education, said:

“A large part of the freshwater ecosystems is potentially endangered by the high concentration of pharmaceuticals”.

He said that a large number of drugs—analgesics, antibiotics, anti-platelet agents, hormones, psychiatric drugs and antihistamines—have been found at levels dangerous for wildlife. As part of a study, he focused on one drug, diclofenac, which both the European Union and the US Environmental Protection Agency have identified as an environmental threat; its veterinary use in India has driven a subspecies of vulture on the Indian subcontinent to the brink of extinction.

For scale, healthcare in the world’s largest economies, including China and India, accounts for 4% of global emissions, while carbon dioxide emissions from healthcare in the world’s largest economies account for about 5% of their national carbon footprints, according to a recent study. Scientists at the Potsdam Institute for Climate Impact Research in Germany have said that climate change and medicines are inextricably linked, with rising global temperatures associated with everything from the spread of infectious diseases to the impact of dangerous weather events. They say that this is the major threat to human health of the 21st century.
Mr Sheerman: I am listening attentively to the hon. Gentleman. A cross-party group of us are very interested in the quality of water in our rivers and streams. Indeed, in Huddersfield, I chair Greenstreams, which looks at the issue locally. Will he look with us at the quality of the Thames, and how its high levels of pollution were turned around right on our doorstep? Of course, building the new Palace of Westminster will have a vast impact on that river.

David Tredinnick: I certainly would. Representing Bosworth, a hosiery and knitwear constituency in the midlands, I have spent much of the last 30 years in the House—not quite as long as the hon. Gentleman, I think, from memory—looking at the problem of phosphorescent dyes, which are very popular in the clothing industry, getting into sewage works and water streams. Of course I would be happy to become involved in that.

I turn to the importance of the UK’s having a sustainable healthcare policy. At the moment, one third of the world’s population already has, in part, a sustainable healthcare system. The two most populous countries in the world are, colleagues will recall, China and India; China has a population of 1.4 billion and India has a population of 1.3 billion. I say to my right hon. Friend the Minister that the challenge for us in this country is to develop—or to take forward from their small base—zero-carbon medicines and healthcare. We cannot ignore this subject.

China has 65,000 hospitals that use zero-carbon treatments in the shape of acupuncture. They also use traditional Chinese herbal medicine, which has a carbon footprint close to zero. I have to say to my right hon. Friend that India is light years ahead. Not only does it have a family health Ministry; it has the Ministry of AYUSH—the Ministry of Ayurveda, Yoga & Naturopathy, Unani, Siddha and Homoeopathy, which is a sustainable health Ministry that is very much supported by Prime Minister Modi, who has just been elected for another five years. The Ministry has seen its budget increase four times in the last six years.

I say to my right hon. Friend that it is a mystery to me why the authorities in this country—the National Institute for Health and Care Excellence. NHS England and, to a certain extent, the Department of Health and Social Care—do not look far afield beyond our country and take note of what is happening in other parts of the world. NICE decided to query the effectiveness of acupuncture, a zero-carbon treatment, for lower back pain. In January, I asked its chief executive, Sir Andrew Dillon, whether he had looked at evidence from China. He said no, on cost grounds; admittedly, NICE’s budget has been reduced. However, that is a mistake; we should look further afield.

Today, the head of NHS England, Simon Stevens, made a blanket attack on homeopaths over the issue of vaccinations I personally support the Daily Mail campaign for vaccinations, which is a good campaign. What I think is mistaken is to attack a movement. Again, we need to look abroad, at what happens in India, bearing in mind that homeopathy—I will not dwell on it for long—is a zero-carbon treatment. Some would say that there is nothing there in homeopathy, but in Delhi there are 6,000 homeopathy clinics and 15,000 registered practitioners; 80% are doctors with five years’ training. I went to a clinic in Calcutta that is treating 2,000 patients a day in the off-season, with 100 doctors on duty each day. I really think that we should look at this.

I will finish on homeopathy on this point. In the whole of India, there are 300,000 homeopathic practitioners, a quarter of a million of whom are doctors with five years’ training. How can it be that at a time of environmental crisis and the shocking carbon footprint of the health service, we are not taking this, the second largest medical system in the world, seriously? I have to say that I think the head of our health service, Simon Stevens, has been very badly advised, and I say the same to Andrew Dillon. I think they have been badly advised. They should get out there and see what is happening in the rest of the world and bury their prejudices.

I met and would like to thank Shripad Naik, the Minister in charge of AYUSH; Dr Rajesh Kotecha, his Secretary; and Pramod Pathak, the Additional Secretary, for the courtesy extended to me when I visited the Ministry on a week-long tour of facilities in India. I am most grateful to them and I wish them well as they look after their 700,000 practitioners, 700 teaching institutions and 200 postgraduate institutions; manage an annual intake on degree courses of 46,000 students and an annual intake on postgraduate courses of 6,000; and look after 28,000 dispensaries and 9,000 Government manufacturing units. They provide 4.6 million practitioners per 10,000 of population. That is what we should be looking at.

Colleagues wish to speak, and I certainly do not want to monopolarise the time this afternoon. I suggest that we have to broaden the scope of our environmental thinking to look at the whole issue of healthcare. I have seen this elsewhere and I do think that we need to think about zero-carbon treatments and zero-carbon medicines. They are out there, used by one third of the world’s population. We need to wise up, as my kids say—“Daddy, wise up.” We need to take note that three babies a day are born addicted to opioid drugs. We need to realise that the new antibiotics that we need are not coming online fast enough. We have to go back to the future, if I may quote Alvin Toffler—I think it was him—and look for new solutions in 4,000-year-old medical systems. If we do, we will have a happier, healthier world, with a better carbon footprint.

5.13 pm

Kerry McCarthy (Bristol East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hosie. The parliamentary authorities are doing their bit to combat global warming by not having the heating on today—I sent for my cardigan, so I will survive.

The hon. Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) made an interesting speech. His was a slightly imaginative interpretation, perhaps, of the subject of the petition, but I say to him that the Environmental Audit Committee, on which I serve, is, as part of its greening government inquiry, looking at the environmental footprint of the NHS estates. Some of those issues are coming up as part of that inquiry. I think that all areas of Government need to look at how they can reduce their carbon footprint.

The petition under discussion today had 405 signatories from Bristol East. Many of my constituents are passionate about this issue. I am very pleased that we are now talking about rewilding as a natural climate solution. It can draw millions of tonnes of carbon from the atmosphere, Lagree, though, with what the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas) said: we need to look at both sides of the coin. I find when I take part in debates such
as this and particularly when I talk about agriculture and its footprint—we had a debate in this Chamber three weeks ago about deforestation of the Amazon—that there can often be a focus on the positive side, with people saying, “Let’s restore our soil; let’s plant lots of trees,” but not addressing the fact that huge amounts of destruction are going on. There is not much point in planting trees if, with the other hand, we are destroying the Amazon to grow soya for livestock feed or whatever.

Mr Sheerman: Do we actually have to go to the Amazon on this issue? A leading professor at the University of Cambridge, Professor Steve Evans, who is a great friend of mine, believes that soil degradation here at home, and worldwide, is probably the greatest challenge that we face at the moment. I am talking about what we actually grow our plants and trees in.

Kerry McCarthy: Yes, soil is a huge issue. The Environmental Audit Committee did a very good inquiry on it a few years ago, and the all-party parliamentary group on agroecology for sustainable food and farming, which I chair, did a three-part inquiry. One of the amendments that I tried to get into the Agriculture Bill, with the list of public money for public goods, was to say that better soil health ought to be identified as a particular public good. The response of the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice), who was responsible for farming, was that it was covered by the broader list and the Government did not want to be too specific, but now that the Agriculture Bill—well, who knows whether the Agriculture Bill is coming back? Who knows whether we will even be here tomorrow, let alone in time for the Agriculture Bill to come back? But I would like to see the point to which I have referred spelled out more specifically and in the Environment Bill, too.

As the petition stated, we need to act fast to avoid a climate emergency. Reducing carbon emissions alone will not be enough to keep the heating of the planet below 1.5°C. We also need to find ways of removing carbon from the atmosphere, and nature is our greatest ally in doing that. Evidence suggests that natural climate solutions could provide more than one third of the greenhouse gas mitigation required globally between now and 2030, yet natural solutions currently receive only 2.5% of the funding spent globally on cutting emissions. The lack of focus on natural solutions is indicative of the wider lack of action on reversing the ecological crisis over the past 40 years.

Alex Sobel (Leeds North West) (Lab/Co-op): On that point and on the earlier point about deforestation, here at home peat bogs play a hugely important role in carbon sequestration. Should not the Government invest more in restoring peat bogs in the UK?

Kerry McCarthy: Yes, that is really important. I think that there should be a ban on the burning of blanket bogs. I will have something to say about grouse moors in a moment. Another issue is peat in horticultural products. There has been quite a campaign to stop that, and I know that quite a lot of gardeners would support that. That is all part and parcel of this.

The Intergovernmental Science-Policy Platform on Biodiversity and Ecosystem Services found that 1 million species “already face extinction, many within decades, unless action is taken”.

It is a very sad fact that the UK is now one of the most nature-depleted countries in the world: it is ranked 189th out of 218, with a 41% species decline since 1970. Many of us are species champions; I am the parliamentary swift species champion. I know that other people are doing very good work on that here. We need to get it on the political agenda, but it is still shocking how much damage has been done in recent decades.

It is clear that nature is struggling against climate change, habitat loss, pollution and intensive farming, but we can turn that around radically by changing the way we manage land. Rewilding is the only solution that offers the opportunity to tackle the climate and ecological emergencies together. The benefits of rewilding our peatlands, heathlands, grasslands, woodlands, saltmarshes, wetlands and coastal waters are diverse. That would lock away carbon, clean air and water, reconnect us with nature, protect communities at risk of flooding, revitalise wildlife, restore our soil and support new economic opportunities.

In preparation for this speech, I read an article in The Spectator by the Minister’s brother, Ben Goldsmith, that was titled “The triumphant return of the British beaver”.

He was saying that some people say, “Well, beavers are a bit messy, aren’t they?” This is the same sort of thing that we were talking about in relation to grass verges. I have some constituents who say, “Now that the grass in the parks and along the roadsides isn’t cut to within a centimetre of its life, it looks a bit messy with all this stuff growing,” but that is what nature ought to look like. Ben Goldsmith, in response to people saying that beavers make a bit of a mess, said:

“Considering that the majority of our land is stripped, cultivated, tidied and managed by humans, surely we can...allow nature a bit of free rein along our watercourses.”

That underpins this debate. Nature ought to be allowed to do what nature does. It should not be controlled and tidied out of existence.

My hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel) mentioned peatland. We are lucky to have 13% of the world’s peatland in the UK, but the habitat is suffering: 80% has been damaged by drainage, extraction, burning or overgrazing. As a result, the equivalent of the emissions of 660,000 UK households are released each year. This natural resource can take carbon out of the atmosphere, but because of the way we treat it, it is releasing more emissions. The Government should ban the extraction and burning of peat immediately. Extraction for compost releases almost half a million tonnes of carbon dioxide a year, which is the equivalent of 100,000 cars on the road, so why do we always talk about cars, but not how domestic gardening is causing a problem?

Voluntary targets to phase out horticultural peat are not being met and it is over a year and a half since the Government said progress was insufficient. It is now time for action. Rewilding our peatlands is a no-brainer: it sequesters significant amounts of carbon, provides clean water and reduces flooding. Several years ago, I went to flood-hit areas with my hon. Friend the Member for Halifax (Holly Lynch). Anyone who has been there...
can see the impact of the burning of the moors on the catchment area. It makes sense to look after our peatlands and plant trees.

Some critics of the rewilding agenda say that there is a choice between feeding ourselves and nature, and that turning more land over to rewilding, rather than using it for agriculture, will mean that we lose out in food security. However, the least productive marginal land often provides the best options for carbon sequestration, rewilding and other ecosystems services. We already have large areas of land that produce little food, which could be used to store vast amount of carbon. Grouse moor estates cover around 1.3 million hectares of England, Scotland and Wales. Deer stalking estates account for around 1.8 million hectares in Scotland. These estates are commonly located on degraded peatlands, currently managed at high environmental cost, using practices such as burning, for the benefit of a relatively tiny number of shooters. We need to reassess our priorities and take a more strategic approach to the use of that land.

I chair the all-party parliamentary group on agroecology for sustainable food and farming, which does excellent work on this agenda. The Minister was, before his elevation to greater things, one of the vice chairs of the APPG. Rewilding must be accompanied by a wider transition to nature and climate-friendly farming. The Knepp estate is a good example of how that works.

It is well documented that the intensification of farming since the second world war has left less and less space for nature in the UK. To turn that around, the Government ought to commit to a transition to sustainable agroecological farming by 2030. That is supported by the Food, Farming and Countryside Commission of the Royal Society for the encouragement of Arts, Manufactures and Commerce. The Government must also commit to net zero emissions from agriculture by 2040 and reverting parcels of arable land, particularly the third that is used for animal feed, to permanent grassland, which has high levels of soil, carbon and biodiversity value.

I mentioned that the Agriculture Bill’s approach of public money for public goods is a step in the right direction, but it needs to be more ambitious. If £1.9 billion of the £3 billion currently spent on common agricultural policy payments were allocated to supporting native woodland re-establishment, and the restoration and protection of peat bogs, heaths and the species rich grasslands over a total of 6 million hectares, that could mean sequestering 47 million tonnes of CO₂ a year, which is more than one tenth of current UK greenhouse gas emissions.

As I mentioned, we cannot think of natural solutions only on a domestic level. The UK should play its part on the world stage by ensuring that all UK aid is nature-positive. I know that the Minister, in his role as Minister for the Department for International Development, thinks that is important. We need to support more integrated interventions that improve people’s lives and enhance the natural environment. We need to stop harmful investments that destroy nature and contribute to climate change, such as the deforestation of the Amazon. We need to look at how our consumption patterns here are harming the environment overseas.

We need to negotiate an ambitious deal with people and nature at the Convention on Biological Diversity next October. We need to look at other countries that are leading by example on rewilding. Ethiopia planted more than 350 million trees in one day in July—God knows how they managed that, but that is what they did—with the aim of planting 4 billion in the next year. We should seek to follow that scale of ambition.

To conclude, the UK has the chance to become a world leader in natural climate solutions, but we need financial commitments from the Government. Markets alone will not solve the climate and ecological crisis. Next week, assuming we will still be here, the Government have the chance to prove their commitment—actually, this refers to the Budget, which is definitely not happening next week. At some point in the near future, hopefully, if there is not an election, the Government have the chance to prove their commitment, by guaranteeing at least £2.9 billion for the new environmental land management scheme in the Budget, as called for by the National Trust, the Royal Society for the Protection of Birds and the wildlife trusts, whenever that happens. It could also reverse the 42% funding fall as a percentage of GDP for biodiversity conservation since 2008.

Finally, taking a different approach to the way land is managed is as important as high-tech solutions to address climate breakdown. I have heard the Minister of State for Climate Change and Industry talk about weird technological advances that would suck carbon out of the air. I do not see why we need to do that when trees and peat bogs can do the job for us.

5.26 pm

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Ind): It is a pleasure to be here this afternoon and to follow the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who serves on the Environmental Audit Committee. When I first came to this place, I served on that Committee alongside the Minister, and we spent many a jolly afternoon debating a wide range of subjects and conducting various inquiries.

I fear this speech may become a march around my constituency. In the words of the chief executive of Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust, Debbie Tan, we must look to local solutions. The national picture is crucial, but in each of our constituencies we can ensure that there are good and important projects.

I want to focus on trees. A fortnight ago, Extinction Rebellion came to Westminster and provided each of us with a tree. Perhaps it was not wholly sustainable, being in a single-use plastic pot. None the less, I was struck by the image in Portcullis House of Birnam wood coming to Dunsinane, as these walking trees were paraded through the building. The humble oak tree, a fantastic symbol of our countryside, is one of the best carbon reservoirs we could have. I was disappointed that afternoon to get a beech tree rather than an oak, but I proudly took it home and ensured it was planted in my constituency. The oak tree lives and grows for 200 years, which is why it is important that we plant all the time, ensuring there is a replenished stock.

My hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) mentioned the Department of Health and Social Care being an important partner with the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs when it comes to the environment, but we must also
look to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, because it has a crucial role in ensuring that our natural environment works hand in hand with the built environment, so we can address the challenge of climate change. I am blessed to represent a heavily treed constituency, but there are many instances of historic oak trees being chopped down, despite having tree preservation orders. There is relentless pressure to build more houses in areas where there is a conflict between nature and the built environment. Valley Park Woodlands are hard up against the 3,000 or so houses built in Valley Park.

Given the pressure that exists, there has to be a balance; that is what much of this debate is about. Of course, we have to provide houses, but we have to ensure that they are in the right place and that there is access to the natural environment so that people can enjoy the special areas that need to be preserved, or simply have somewhere to walk the dog. Those things do not always fit together very easily—walking the dog in an SSSI is never a good idea. There are many examples in my constituency of pressures on Ramsar protected sites such as those in the New Forest, as well as places such as Emer Bog in North Baddesley. It is about providing the right facilities.

I spent 10 years as my local authority’s cabinet member for leisure. At the end of that time, we were heavily in negotiations with the local landowner to take possession of an area called Fishlake Meadows. The Hampshire and Isle of Wight Wildlife Trust now describes the area as a “glimpse of how the Test Valley would have looked over 2000 years ago...a dynamic, shifting swathe of ponds, lakes, reedbed, willow scrub and fen grassland”, but 20 years ago it was farmed agricultural land—it was drained, planted and ploughed for food that we clearly did not require. It is a much healthier environment now that it has been given back to nature and is functioning exactly as it should: as a flood prevention area for the town of Romsey and as a place where ospreys, otters and kingfishers can thrive. It is all about ensuring that we have the right resources in place to support the land. Hon. Members have spoken about nature being “tidied up”, but when we took possession of Fishlake Meadows, it was at a tipping point. If it had been left any longer, the balance would have tipped towards those invasive species that are not wholly desirable, and bringing it back to the point it is at today would have been a much harder job.

I wish to pick up on comments made about farming. It is important to reflect that agriculture can have an important role for good. Last Friday, I had a visit on my schedule to Broughton Water Buffalo in my constituency of pressures on Ramsar protected sites. The reservoir of CO\textsubscript{2} that peat bogs can provide; peat has not been burned in the New Forest for many a long year, but there are still instances where it is dug, quite illegally, so the national park authority has a massive role to play in ensuring that laws are adhered to and peat bogs are restored and maintained. Again, that can provide some conflict. I had better declare an interest as a member of—I am going to get the name wrong—not the New Forest Pony Breeding and Cattle Society, but one of the other horsey societies in the New Forest. There is a real conflict between draining the peat bogs, which riders would love because it would give us wider access to the forest, and the crucial need to ensure for nature’s sake that that does not happen and that peat bogs and mires are managed correctly.

Many hon. Members who have spoken in our debate were recognised a fortnight ago with species champion awards. I will make a quick pitch for the species that I champion: the Duke of Burgundy butterfly, which I gather is the pollinator that has recovered most over the past 12 months. I would like to pretend that that is the result of some great breeding programme of mine, but sadly it is not; it is the result of our warm summers and the efforts of landowners to ensure that the habitats for that extremely endangered butterfly are kept as they should be. In yet another example of how farming can work hand in hand with nature, it is coppiced hazel that provides the best environment for that butterfly. It is important that forestry management continues, but it needs to continue in a way that enables species and, crucially, pollinators to thrive.

I have probably said enough. I very much welcome our recognition of the crucial role that nature can play in sucking up CO\textsubscript{2}. In the words of the hon. Member for Bristol East, we do not need any great technology to do that; trees can do it for us.

5.35 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Mr Hosie, and to follow the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes), who has reminded me of some pleasant holidays in the New Forest. My wife always reminds me that I fell off a bike there—she will be delighted that that is now on the public record.

I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on his excellent introduction on behalf of the Petitions Committee. E-petitions have become a feature of this Parliament; they are an excellent way for the public to ensure that we hear their concerns
and to press us to take action. It is fair to say that we have all received many representations on climate change in the past year or two, but today’s debate relates to a particular aspect that we have not touched on much. That shows that the climate emergency is moving up the agenda of the public’s priorities fast. In my view, we are not going far enough fast enough. How many of us can say that in our own lives we are doing all we can to tackle climate change?

Of course, change should come from the top. The Committee on Climate Change’s report in May led the UK to adopt a net zero target by 2050, but it also found that the Government are failing to prepare the country for the inevitable impact of climate change. That failure is putting our communities and infrastructure at risk. The consequences of our actions are with us already: over the past two decades, severe weather events across the country have cost an average of £1.5 billion a year—only this weekend, parts of Cheshire were subject to severe flooding. Those figures will be dwarfed in coming years by the overall cost and effect of climate change, including the cost to our environment and the human cost as swathes of land become uninhabitable all over the globe. If we do not take action now, the effects predicted in this country alone will include a trebling of heat deaths by 2050, far more frequent flooding, and food insecurity, which is a matter of national security. This is an emergency—and, of course, we may well be one of the more fortunate countries in respect of the impact of climate change.

We cannot and should not act alone, but that should not be an excuse for failing to take a lead. Why are we still financing fossil fuel projects overseas? According to Christian Aid, the UK Government are still spending more on fossil fuels than on renewable energy in developing countries. How does that set an example? It is not more on fossil fuels than on renewable energy in developing countries. How does that set an example? It is not leadership. What does it say to the likes of China and India, whose CO₂ emissions dwarf our own? Will our desperation to seal trade agreements with those countries—should we ever leave the EU—inhibit our ability to talk candidly with them about their need to change tack, too? I have a particular regard to the United States in that respect.

We know that our homes, our workplaces and other infrastructure need to be prepared for unavoidable climate impacts, yet the Committee’s report also tells us that the Government funding to help to support regions, businesses and individuals has ceased. There has been a failure to start the critical conversations that we need to have with the public about the changes to behaviour that are necessary. In those circumstances, how will we really be able to equip our communities to meet the challenges of reducing carbon emissions and removing carbon from our atmosphere?

We know that natural climate solutions, and carbon capture and storage, can play a very important role in getting us to net zero. Rewilding and other natural climate solutions can be used to draw potentially millions of tonnes of CO₂ out of the air, and to restore and protect our living systems. Indeed, new research estimates that a worldwide planting programme could remove two thirds of all the emissions that have been pumped into the atmosphere by human activities. Of course, to do that we need to really prioritise the environment.

There was a manifesto pledge from the Conservatives during the last election to plant 11 million trees. I do not know whether the Minister can update us on the figures today, but I think we are some way short of that at the moment. Also, tree planting targets have been missed every year since they were set in 2013. Tree planting in England fell short of targets in the last year, with less than 1,500 hectares of the Government’s planned 5,000 hectares being planted with trees. Only 13% of the UK’s land area is covered by trees, which is well below the figure for other European countries; on average, the figure is about 35% across Europe. So, 13% simply will not be good enough to meet the challenges we face.

We often trade numbers across the main Chamber: the number of operations carried out, the number of homes built or the number of police officers that we have. Perhaps the real sign of change here will be when we begin to trade insults over the number of trees being planted by each Government. That would be a real sign that there was a genuine commitment on both sides of the House to take this issue seriously.

That is why campaigners are calling the Government’s progress on this matter “painfully slow” and are calling for a new strategy to enable the Government target to be met. The Woodland Trust has called for much greater Government support and I echo that call. I am pleased that my own party has pledged to be more ambitious. I refer to the pledge made last month by my hon. Friend the Member for Leicester South (Jonathan Ashworth) that a Labour Government would plant a million trees in hospitals throughout the UK, which is a very innovative and interesting way to look at things. Some departmental leads could be taken on this matter, too.

I was also pleased to put my name to a letter from my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley Central (Dan Jarvis) in support of the Northern Forest. Again, that is an initiative spearheaded by the Woodland Trust that aims to plant 50 million trees in the north of England. It is said that this Northern Forest would generate around £2.5 billion of social, economic and environmental benefits, which would be at least a fivefold return on investment. That sounds like a win-win situation to me and I hope we can all support it.

In addition to these ambitious plans, I am pleased that the Labour party has pledged to ban all harmful pesticides, such as neonicotinoids, which we believe pose a serious risk of harm to honey bees and other pollinators. We should not underestimate the importance of wildflowers to the ecosystem; we know that if we do not get them right, there is a risk to the entire food chain.

In that regard, I congratulate my local authority, Cheshire West and Chester Council, on work that it has been doing in respect of bulb planting and allowing certain sections of the highway verges to grow wild. The aesthetics of that certainly work for me: it is not everyone’s cup of tea, but I think it adds a bit of colour and a bit of pollen to the ecosystem, which is something we can all learn from.

One of the chief recommendations of the Thirty by 2030 report, which was launched last week by my hon. Friend the Member for Salford and Eccles (Rebecca Long Bailey), the shadow Business Secretary, was sourcing 90% of electricity from renewables and low-carbon sources by 2030. This includes greater use of carbon
capture and storage, with a goal of expanding it to become a “significant component” of the energy mix by the late 2020s.

On that front, I was pleased to learn about a carbon capture usage and storage initiative for the north-west that is based in my own constituency. The HyNet proposals would be based on the key industrial cluster around the Mersey estuary, alongside state-of-the-art hydrogen production in the long run. About 5% of the UK’s energy output comes from this area, due to the high concentration of energy-intensive industry there, but its location also brings with it an opportunity, because there is the ability to repurpose the Liverpool Bay oilfield and gasfield infrastructure, to divert around 1 million tonnes of CO₂ per year into those oilfields. That would be the equivalent of taking 600,000 cars off the road. Ultimately, these proposals have the potential to take over 10 million tonnes of CO₂ out of the atmosphere each year, which would make a huge contribution to reducing our emissions.

The plan would also have economic benefits. It has the potential to create around 5,000 jobs between now and 2025. The key is to finalise business models quickly, to bring forward some of the first stages of industrial development, so that we can start to realise the impressive ambitions for this project that a range of local players has come forward to try to realise.

I believe that these plans have a big role to play, not only in carbon capture but in taking us away from CO₂ and getting our economy more involved in hydrogen. I hope that we can discuss with the relevant Ministers—they are probably Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Ministers, rather than the Minister before us today—how we can bring that plan forward as soon as possible.

I believe that this country has an opportunity to become a world leader in climate solutions, but that can be achieved only by strengthening policy to deliver emissions reductions across all levels of Government, including across Departments. Delivery must be regarded as being much more urgently needed, and we can also do our part at other levels of Government.

Let us take the example of planning, which my hon. Friend the Member for Stalybridge and Hyde (Jonathan Reynolds) referred to. Planning is not normally a party political battleground, but I believe that, if used innovatively, it could drive forward this agenda. I have long held the view that we should be doing an awful lot more to require developers to future-proof developments in terms of not only the environment, but climate risk. However, we should not just look at the bricks and mortar of the homes; we should look at how estates are designed.

Planning decisions made decades ago can still affect things now. I say that because on some of the estates built in the 1960s I see how the trees planted as young saplings have grown out of all proportion to the surrounding houses. Such trees are often too unwieldy to be of use, and they can damage surrounding properties with their roots, which have to be cut. Then, the tree has to be cut down. Also, some trees become diseased. So, this is an issue on which, in future, we could probably show a little more forethought.

Let us make sure not only that developments being built now have a minimum number of trees planted in their common areas, but that the trees planted will grow in sympathy with their surroundings. Let us think about what those trees will look like in 20 or 30 years. Also, there is no good reason for new industrial developments or office blocks not to have trees and plants designed into their layout.

When we consider new developments, let us look at transport too, because that is a key factor. There is evidence that improved bus networks can reduce carbon emissions. A fully loaded double-decker bus can take, on average, 75 cars off the road, based on average vehicle occupancy for both buses and cars; one bus can move 10 times as many people as a car can.

The benefits of a renaissance in bus travel are very clear in reducing CO₂, but I wonder whether the people setting climate policy in London really understand that it is not quite as easy to get around on public transport in the rest of the country. Try getting a bus after 6 pm in my constituency, or on a Sunday, and it soon becomes apparent that if someone’s shift pattern is not 9 to 5, Monday to Friday, they need a car for work. So, we absolutely need to boost local bus services, which will help us to tackle CO₂ emissions.

I am sad to say that previous generations of politicians have failed to appreciate the enormity of what we now face. We are sleepwalking into a climate catastrophe, and unless we begin to face up to the fact that carbon reduction needs to be done now, we will be the last generation to enjoy the benefits of industrialisation and we will impose on the next generation the consequences of our indolence.

This debate is not about some theoretical future prospect; it is about something that is happening now. We see it all around us, and around the world, with increased fires, droughts and cyclones. The warnings from the scientists are crystal-clear: unless we begin to tackle these issues with urgency, we will only see more of these climatic events. We should not hesitate to call this an emergency. People say words can be spoken in here that do not really change anything, and maybe at the moment they have a point, but we must show people that we can do better and that we have a real commitment from the heart of Government to tackle climate change. A substantial British green new deal should be central to that. It would reduce emissions, create employment and show the rest of the world that economic benefit and climate benefit are not mutually exclusive.

We need to recognise that we are here now because there have been several centuries of relentless pursuit of economic growth without thought for the environmental consequences. There have been so many advances made in that time that it would be wrong to suggest that economic growth is a bad thing, but it is no longer tenable to consider economic advancement in isolation. The scale of the challenge we face from climate change should lead us to say that restoring nature is as much an economic imperative as a moral one.

5.50 pm

John Mc Nally (Falkirk) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Hosie. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on presenting today’s topical debate and on taking so many interventions with great patience. I want to declare a non-financial interest: I am a member of the Communities Along the Carron Association project in the Falkirk area and the Community Green Initiative. If we are still here next week, I want to invite Members to attend an
inaugural all-party group on youth climate action on 5 November at 12 noon. I cannot remember exactly where it is. I also congratulate the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy), who mentioned the importance of peat bogs. Scotland has the largest peat bog in Europe, and we cherish its magnificence and beauty.

“Restore nature on a massive scale to help stop climate breakdown” is a straightforward petition, and the petitioners are to be congratulated on their clarity of purpose and their aims. Who would not agree with such an ambition? A world conversion is taking place across the planet. We are at a pivotal moment in time, and the UK Government must realise the importance of the petition. It calls for the UK Government to financially and politically commit to supporting natural climate solutions that can draw millions of tonnes of CO₂ from the air.

The UK Government support the need to combat deforestation and to promote sustainable forests. All the evidence before us shows that urgency is required to face this climate and biodiversity emergency head-on. All Governments have to ask difficult questions, but the question is very simple: are we to allow a crisis that hits the poorest people and countries the hardest? To continue to do so would surely be a sin, and the answer has to be a resounding no.

Why, therefore, do we undermine international climate finance contributions by UK actions elsewhere? For example, in last week’s debate I mentioned that the UK consumes 3.3 million tonnes of soy per year, taking it from the lungs of the world—the rainforest and Amazon regions—for animal feed. The UK could take steps to stop that practice immediately. Will the Minister tell us exactly what the UK Government are doing to address that unsustainable practice?

I want to move on to what Scotland is doing. The Scottish Government are determined to lead by example by measuring and enhancing our own natural capital. By doing so, we will benefit the ecosystems and people of our own country, and we will do our bit to help the environment and wellbeing of the wider world. Scotland’s biodiversity is at the heart of a thriving, sustainable Scotland. Initiatives worth mentioning are the marine protected areas and the introduction of white-tailed eagles. Beavers are now flourishing in Scotland. Scotland is taking a leading role in reducing carbon emissions and promoting one of the most ambitious climate change strategies of any country in the world.

Studies suggest that the elements of Scotland’s natural capital that can be given a monetary value are worth more than £20 billion each year to our economy, supporting more than 60,000 jobs. The Environmental and Resource Economics project report for the Scottish Environment Protection Agency concluded that the economic value of ecosystem services can be estimated at between £21.5 billion and £23 billion per year to Scotland. Those are staggering figures. Many of Scotland’s growth sectors, such as tourism and food and drink depend on high quality air, land and water. The Office for National Statistics figures reported the equivalent of 21,500 full-time jobs in Scotland’s low-carbon economy, showing that strong emission reductions are fully compatible with an economically thriving nation.

Scotland has met its target of 11,200 hectares of new tree planting—a significant increase on 2017—and plans to increase the target further in 2024 from 10,000 to 15,000 hectares. The new legislative framework is the toughest, most ambitious in the world, with the new 75% target for 2030 going far beyond what the IPCC special report says is needed globally to prevent warming of more than 1.5°. Our end target of net zero emissions of all greenhouse gases by 2045 is five years ahead of the rest of the UK, and is firmly based on what the Committee on Climate Change advised is the limit of what can currently be achieved.

Being mindful of other issues and unafraid to face up to difficult questions, poor air quality remains an issue in numerous towns and cities in Scotland. Effective change is needed now so that all of us can breathe clean air and lead healthy lives in the future. The Scottish Government’s ambition is that Scotland’s air quality should be the best in Europe. As part of the Cleaner Air for Scotland governance group, we have incorporated the British Heart Foundation, which will help to bring a fresh perspective to the issue.

To conclude, we are encouraging a reduction of energy use and promoting better choices to prevent harmful emissions, and protecting what nature has to offer. All of us have to face up to possible risks to the environment now and in the future. Any lowering of environmental standards post-Brexit will not be tolerated in Scotland.

5.57 pm

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) for introducing the debate so well. He spoke with passion in his calm-mannered speech, and many of the points he raised set us up nicely for what was a good debate on all sides of the Chamber.

It is quite common for there to be consensus across all parties in Westminster Hall. If only BBC Parliament and the news channels showed more of what goes on here and less of what goes on in the main Chamber, people would see politics at its best. Many of the debates that take place here get into the detail and intricacies. They encourage Ministers to look at the details that matter, not just the soundbites. When we look at rewilding and restoring nature, it is in many cases the detail that matters. It is easy to put big picture phraseologies around how we want to restore and rewild nature—but let us insert a very large number of trees and say we will plant this—but it is the detail and delivery that makes a really big difference.

It has been said by colleagues on both sides of the Chamber that climate change is real. In Parliament, businesses, local government and in all our communities, we are confronted by a pressing question: since Parliament has declared a climate emergency, what are you doing differently? If the answer is nothing, as frequently it is, that is not a good enough answer. When it comes to restoring nature, it means not only looking at how we reverse the biodiversity loss in rural areas, but how we reverse it in urban areas as well. It is about what role our brilliant local councils can play, as well as central Government. It is about businesses, voluntary groups, the third sector, and co-operatives and mutuals as well. There are lots of challenges and it is up to each and every one of us to do something.
That is why, when the shadow DEFRA team talks about the climate emergency, my hon. Friends the Members for Workington (Sue Hayman) and for Stroud (Dr Drew) are always keen to mention the phrase that my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) used in her remarks: this is a climate and ecological emergency. If we focus solely on carbon, we will miss part of the debate. That is why we need to look at habitat loss, biodiversity loss, the problems with our soil and so much more besides.

The issue matters to all of us, no matter where we live. We know that catastrophe awaits us if we do not act sooner. As my hon. Friend the Member for Ellesmere Port and Neston (Justin Madders) mentioned, we are already seeing the effects now. If we do not drastically cut the amount of carbon we produce, the result will be sea level rises, extreme weather, population movements, and large parts of our planet—our home—becoming inhospitable and unliveable. There will also be greater biodiversity loss, habitat loss and the extinction of countless animal, insect, fish and plant species.

[SIR DAVID AMESS IN THE CHAIR]

Indeed, while the debate has been going on, according to the latest biodiversity loss figures we will have lost a couple of species around the world. That shows just how pressing the matter is. Many of those species might not be household names. We had good debates on the ivory ban, in which the Minister played a part, regarding the loss of some flagship species—the elephant and the rhino—due to hunting activities. However, as we saw in the debate about the loss of insects led by my hon. Friend the Member for Leeds North West (Alex Sobel), small insects that many of us will not know the names of are just as important to our environment.

That is why it is good that so many Members have spoken about why rewilding is good. My hon. Friends the Members for Bristol East and for Ellesmere Port and Neston, and the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) talked about activities in their constituencies, highlighting best practice. Other Members discussed the big themes. I was very glad that the hon. Member for Chatham and Aylesford (Tracey Crouch) mentioned green walls in schools and roadside planting. Frequently, it is not just about big schemes; small things add up as well.

My hon. Friend the Member for Enfield, Southgate (Bambos Charalambous) said that we need to have more nature-based solutions, which is at the heart of what we are talking about. Frequently, we get very good language, but not enough action follows. That is why we need to say that rewilding and restoring nature is good, and we should promote it much more. It is a really important part of a nature-led solution to the climate and ecological emergency.

The right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North spoke passionately about the importance of trees, and Opposition Members made contributions about the variety of trees as well. We need not only to plant more trees, but to ensure that the species that we plant do not contribute to a mono-species environment in which it is harder for insects, birdlife and other plants to thrive. We need to have a mixed approach because, in some cases, not ordering a million trees of the same species makes it slightly more expensive. However, ordering different species is what creates a truly unique environment, and we know from the research that planting multiple species alongside each other sequesters more carbon and provides a home for more animal species than having tree species of the same variety in the same location. When we talk about tree planting, we need to ensure that we are talking about true diversity.

The Government say a lot of good words on tree planting. Indeed, their manifesto commitment to plant so many trees, as my hon. Friend for Ellesmere Port and Neston mentioned, was positive. It is a shame that we have not seen action on it. I know that the Minister will not accept any greenwash in his Department, but unfortunately, we have lately had very bold soundbites and very poor delivery on tree planting. I would be grateful if the Minister set out how he intends to reverse that.

Sequestering carbon in our forests is really important. My hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East spoke about the importance of, and the opportunity to, sequester so much more in our natural environment, which could come from a potential change in agricultural setting. I look forward to the introduction of the Agriculture Bill and, as the shadow Minister for fisheries, that of the Fisheries Bill. Those two very important Bills have been hamstrung by the Brexit paralysis, but we need them because of the impact on our natural environment and on coastal and rural communities.

Many Members spoke about the importance of rewetting our peat bogs and preventing the burning of our grouse moors. My party launched that policy during the summer, and I spent an entire day at BBC Plymouth talking to different radio shows and TV stations about why moving driven grouse shooting and changing the economy and approach surrounding it could create additional biodiversity in those rural areas.

That approach works not only on driven grouse shooting, but on rewilding other forms of our natural environment. It is important to make the case not just for a rural environment, but for an urban and rural environment. We need to enhance biodiversity in all settings. As the majority of our population live in urban environments, it is important that our activities as individuals can take place in the areas where we live, not just the areas we want to visit or that we might think of when we talk about natural environments.

The right hon. and learned Member for North East Hertfordshire (Sir Oliver Heald), who is unfortunately no longer in the Chamber, very boldly called for a policy for water. Indeed, the Government’s policies for water are far too managerial when it comes to our response to climate change. I encourage the new Minister to give his Department a little kick in that area, because there is an opportunity to go much further. The over-extraction of water from our chalk streams, for instance, rightly carries an awful lot of headlines. Severe damage is being done to our chalk streams, and it is not just fantastic figures such as Feargal Sharkey who campaign in those areas. Local groups right across our chalk stream communities are really concerned about what is happening in those precious and unique environments. We need to do so much more about that.

Caroline Nokes: I have in my constituency the finest chalk stream in the world, the River Test. It is not simply abstraction that is one of our big challenges,
we have a significant problem with nitrates going into our watercourses, which is causing huge challenges locally.

Luke Pollard: The right hon. Lady is exactly right. Frequently, when it comes to problems of biodiversity loss and habitat loss, the problems are always “and” rather than “or”—as are the solutions. That gives me an opportunity to mention the contribution of the hon. Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick). I feared that he may have stumbled into the incorrect debate for most of his remarks; however, he raised an important point about pharmaceutical effluents seeping into waterways.

The Minister has not yet had an opportunity to sit with me in a Delegated Legislation Committee and hear me talk about water quality, but I am sure those days will come very soon. He will hear of my concern about coked-up eels in the River Thames. Cocaine passed through by human behaviour is resulting in severe consequences for our marine life. “Coked-up eels” is a phrase that sometimes attracts the attention of our friends in the media, but I know that the Minister will be very familiar with the impact of human behaviour on the natural environment.

In my last few remarks, I will mention one part of the petition that has not really been picked up on. The petitioners said:

“That who manage our land and sea play a pivotal role and should be supported to come together to deliver carbon reductions.”

Indeed, before the debate the World Wide Fund for Nature sent round a very helpful briefing paper about the seagrass replanting. The majority of our debates about carbon sequestration tend to focus on tree planting, and for good reason. Trees are part of our natural environment. We drive past them, walk past them, and have them in our own gardens and our parks. They are vivid, and indelibly part of the solution. However, seagrasses can sequester 35 times more carbon than equivalent tree planting in the Amazon, for instance.

There is a huge opportunity to expand our seagrass replanting. Indeed, that is what is taking place in Plymouth Sound, the country’s first national marine park, in my constituency. The reintroduction and replanting of seagrass and kelp forests have a hugely important part to play not only in the biodiversity and fantastic marine species in our coastal waters, but in sequestering carbon. We cannot underestimate the importance of the oceans in playing a part in climate change. They have saved our bacon so many times regarding climate change, because of the amount of carbon they absorb. That is leading to ocean acidification and the loss of habitats, as we see around the world.

In sequestering more carbon, we must not focus only on tree planting, as the Government rightly have in their headline policy. I would like the Government to look, through their marine policy—both in terms of the UK’s coastal waters and our waters around our overseas territories further afield, which I know the Minister has an interest in—at how the planting of seagrass, kelp and other marine plant forms can not only contribute to habitat restoration, providing a nursery for many fish and other marine life, but provide an opportunity to sequester so much of the carbon that we have spoken about.

If we do not act quickly, climate change will be irreversible. That is why all the topics that we have spoken about, from actions at ministerial level down to the actions of local groups and wildlife groups, which we have heard so much about today, are so important. We must all do more to tackle climate change. We must all recognise that the climate emergency means that the way we live, work, travel and play all need to change. That is why the direction set by Ministers is so important. Under the previous regime, we had countless consultations from DEFRA, but not enough action. I hope that in this new era, with the Minister in place, there will be an end to the greenwashing and the obsession with press releases. I hope that the era of acting properly, with the swiftness and urgency that we need to address the climate emergency, will truly have begun.

6.10 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Zac Goldsmith): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir David, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Cambridge (Daniel Zeichner) on securing this debate. It is similarly a pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard), who has given a typically wide-ranging, thoughtful and knowledgeable speech on this hugely important issue. I will attempt to answer his questions; the “coked-up eels” debate is probably one for another day, but I look forward to it, not least learning what the impacts are. I do not doubt that human cocaine use has had a marked impact on the river environment, but it is not an area about which I know a great deal, so I look forward to hearing more in a subsequent debate.

The hon. Member for Cambridge mentioned his constituent Maggie, who I believe is 12 years old. He can tell Maggie that I agree with her, and have done since I was her age; indeed, I have committed most of my life to campaigning and working on these issues. Nature clearly matters. Given that it is the only source of our wealth, our health, and our very lives, one could say that it matters more than anything else that could us in this ever-madder place in which we work. All the research, including the recent “State of Nature” report that a number of hon. Members have mentioned, paints a very gloomy picture of nature loss in the UK, with 41% of our species having declined since the 1970s. That report does point to some success stories, and it would be wrong to overlook them. Many of those happened as a consequence of Government, conservation groups, farmers and land managers all working together. Nevertheless, those success stories are the exception; we need there to be many, many more.

The situation globally is even worse. Scientists have warned that even a 1.5° rise in temperatures would be absolutely devastating for humanity, ecosystems and the natural world as a whole, but we are not heading towards a 1.5° rise. Currently, without radical intervention, we are heading towards a 3° rise, which—if we believe the majority of scientists—would be almost apocalyptic. Earlier this year, we saw the results of the most comprehensive assessment yet of the state of nature around the world, and again, the news is really bad. It tells us that today, 1 million species are on the brink of extinction. Over my lifetime, since the early 1970s—I was born in 1975—we have lost a staggering 60% of the world’s land animals in just those few years, and continue

[Caroline Nokes]
to destroy an area of forest the size of 47 football pitches every minute. Someone better at maths than I am would be able to tell you. Members how many football fields’ worth of forest has been destroyed since this debate began. It is utterly shocking.

Our oceans, meanwhile, are under siege; we are told that by 2050, they will contain more plastic than fish, measured by weight. Fisheries that once seemed inexhaustible, such was their abundance, have either collapsed entirely or are on the verge of collapse. A few weeks ago, the Prime Minister referred to tackling climate change and biodiversity loss as “two sides of the same coin”.

He was right. We cannot protect nature unless we address climate change, and we cannot properly address climate change unless we restore nature. I would add that unless we do those things, we have no hope of tackling base poverty around the world, either.

If that seems alarmist, we need only look at the facts. More than 1 billion people depend on forest for their livelihoods, more than 1 billion depend on fish as their main source of protein, and about 200 million depend on fishing for their livelihoods. All of us, of course, ultimately depend on the free services that are provided by nature, without which we simply could not survive. For the sake of nature, of climate and of people, it is critical that we step up our response, at home and internationally.

The good news, as a number of hon. Members have said, is that nature-based solutions have the potential to provide up to a third of the climate change mitigation that we need globally by 2030. Done properly, those solutions can turn the tide on the extinction crisis we are experiencing and provide sustainable, secure livelihoods for millions of people. Given that protecting and restoring nature provides a cascade of solutions to so many of the world’s pressing problems, it is extraordinary that it receives such a tiny proportion of global aid support. Of all the money invested by the world’s Governments in tackling climate change, just 2.5% goes to nature-based solutions. Such solutions should not become a substitute for decarbonisation on a massive scale, as was said by the hon. Member for Brighton, Pavilion (Caroline Lucas), who is no longer in the Chamber. However, those solutions clearly merit a far greater share of resources.

I was therefore thrilled when the Prime Minister announced at last month’s UN climate summit that we in the UK intend to double our climate spending to £11.6 billion between 2021 and 2026, and—even more importantly—that much of that uplift will be invested in nature-based solutions and biodiversity protection. We have already announced a £220 million fund to protect the world’s biodiversity, including £100 million for a biodiverse landscape fund that will protect a large range of cross-border, ecologically biodiverse and important landscapes. We are also trebling annual funding for the brilliant, long-established, and—as some hon. Members will remember—threatened Darwin initiative. Ten years ago, a number of Members had to step up to protect that initiative, because it faced closure. It is an extraordinary initiative, of which we can all be proud.

We are also committing an additional £30 million to tackling the grimly destructive illegal wildlife trade. We are on track to deliver the £5 billion of finance for stopping and reversing deforestation that we pledged alongside Germany and Norway in 2015, and are making big efforts to protect the world’s oceans. We have dedicated £23 million to supporting communities to maintain and enhance 20,000 hectares of mangroves in Madagascar, Indonesia, Latin America and the Caribbean. We have directly helped 100,000 people through building resilient jobs and supporting marine life. We are on track to protect more than half of UK and UK overseas territories waters by 2020 through our world-leading Blue Belt programme, and have announced that we intend to expand that programme much further, with an initial £7 million put aside to protect some of the most diverse marine systems on Earth.

At the UN General Assembly, we announced a global ocean alliance of countries committed to a new global target: to protect at least 30% of the world’s oceans by 2030. Countries are lining up to sign up to that commitment—I forget the exact number, but it is a relatively new campaign, and over 10 countries have already signed up to it, with a number of other countries flirting with doing so. Hopefully, they will sign up in the next few weeks and months. We are also working with our friends across the Commonwealth to tackle the scourge of plastic pollution in our oceans. As one hon. Member pointed out, 1 million birds and 100,000 mammals lose their life every year from eating, or getting tangled up in, ocean plastic. As part of the Commonwealth Clean Oceans Alliance, we have invested in programmes worth up to £70 million to tackle that issue.

We have also invested in research so that we can better understand the role of the oceans. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport mentioned the value of seagrass, and he was right to do so: we know that seagrass has an extraordinary capacity to absorb carbon, but we do not fully understand the role of the oceans as a whole in relation to climate change. For example, we do not know the full impact on the ocean floor of bottom trawling and dredging, but science is emerging that suggests it plays a gigantic role in releasing emissions. That is something we need to know, so we are investing in that research. In the meantime, we are investing in protecting fragile ecosystems in the oceans. We are working on a number of other big interventions on land and at sea, and I look forward to telling hon. Members who are interested in these issues more about those interventions in subsequent debates.

However, this is not just about aid. As we negotiate new free trade agreements, we must be confident that we are not importing deforestation through environmentally damaging goods, as was noted by the hon. Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy). The hon. Member for Falkirk (John Mc Nally) made the point about our environmental footprint here in the UK; I believe that we rely on an overseas land area more than half the size of the UK just for imported commodities such as palm oil, soya and things that we feed our livestock. Whether we like it or not, despite the fact that most people in this country would be appalled to know it, we are importing deforestation daily. Under our global resource initiative taskforce, we are working to create a plan to end our contribution to global deforestation through our supply chains. It is incredibly complex, but we have to find a way to do it. We have no alternative.

The OECD estimates that the top 50 food-producing nations spend about $700 billion a year subsiding landowners and farmers. At the moment, they do that
We have to do that through legislation, because the spoken today about the need to address the issue, but no disagreement with the hon. Members who have a legislative response to the problem and we will come 100% successful as had been hoped. We are developing to reduce and eventually eliminate—the burning of fragile the Member for Romsey and Southampton North almost all hon. Members, including my right hon. Friend to land managers in England to plant trees. A market-based mechanism to provide long-term payments the woodland carbon guarantee, a new £50-million through a local partnership. This year, we will launch new Northumberland forest, which will be delivered efforts. In the next few months, we will consult on a tree right laid out the challenge: we need to ramp up our do much more.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport rightly laid out the challenge: we need to ramp up our efforts. In the next few months, we will consult on a tree strategy for England. Earlier this year, we announced a new Northumberland forest, which will be delivered through a local partnership. This year, we will launch the woodland carbon guarantee, a new £50-million market-based mechanism to provide long-term payments to land managers in England to plant trees.

I will turn my attention back home, which has been the focus of most hon. Members’ speeches and where, as I said, biodiversity is undoubtedly suffering. We need to reverse that and we are taking steps to do so. The UK was the first major economy to set a net zero emissions target in law for 2050. The restoration of nature will be a big part of our response to that challenge. We are already committed to planting 11 million trees in England, plus a further million trees in and around our towns and cities. Despite the scepticism of several hon. Members, we are on target to do that. I am fully confident that we will meet that target, but, equally, I will not pretend that it is anywhere near ambitious enough. We will have to do much more.

The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport rightly laid out the challenge: we need to ramp up our efforts. In the next few months, we will consult on a tree strategy for England. Earlier this year, we announced a new Northumberland forest, which will be delivered through a local partnership. This year, we will launch the woodland carbon guarantee, a new £50-million market-based mechanism to provide long-term payments to land managers in England to plant trees.

I will move on, briefly, to peat, which was raised by almost all hon. Members, including my right hon. Friend the Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes). Peat, including blanket bogs and peat soils under agriculture, acts as the UK’s largest terrestrial carbon store. When peatlands are working and healthy, they sequester carbon, nurture wildlife, act as water regulators and contribute to climate change adaptation and mitigation. Some 86% of peatland emissions come from lowland peat in agricultural use. This year, we launched a lowland agricultural peat taskforce that will deliver recommendations for a new, more sustainable future for agriculture on lowland peat in England.

Several hon. Members talked about the problem of burning peatlands. There is no doubt that they are right; the Government share that view. There has been an attempt, through voluntary initiatives, to scale back—to reduce and eventually eliminate—the burning of fragile and important peat ecosystems, but that has not proven 100% successful as had been hoped. We are developing a legislative response to the problem and we will come back to the House in due course with our plans. There is no disagreement with the hon. Members who have spoken today about the need to address the issue, but we have to do that through legislation, because the alternative simply has not worked.

We are funding the restoration of more than 6,000 hectares of degraded peatland, much of it in the uplands, and we are allocating £10 million to 62 sites across England. We will publish a peat strategy for England that sets out a vision to reverse the decline in England’s peatlands and peat soils.

Much of what I have described, here and overseas, involves what some people refer to as rewilding, which is effectively integrating natural closed processes into land management. Rewilding is already happening across the UK in lots of projects, many of which deliver huge benefits. The hon. Member for Bristol East mentioned the Knepp estate in West Sussex, where agri-environment funding has helped to create extensive grassland and scrub habitats, with huge benefits for declining bird species such as the nightingale and turtle dove. I have not been to the Knepp estate, but I long to go and I will be going. I am told by those who have been that it is magical.

I am grateful to the hon. Lady for quoting my brother’s article in The Spectator in which he promotes the value of untidiness in nature. He has also been a huge promoter of the release of beavers back into the countryside, so I would not get away with not mentioning the return of beavers, more than 500 years since they were eradicated by us. It seems to be unambiguously good news; it is an extraordinary thing.

Beavers are the ultimate keystone species. They build small dams along river tributaries and streams, which play a big role in holding back water following rainfall and help to mitigate flooding and drought, while at the same time breathing life back into the landscape in an extraordinary way. Science is only beginning to understand how that simple species has such a magnificent and transformative impact on the natural world. I am in total agreement with my brother on that, and he would have been furious if I had not mentioned the beaver.

In the marine environment, domestically, we are expanding our network of marine protected areas. The recent designation of 41 new marine conservation zones means that we have 355 sites covering 25% of UK waters.

Our new Environment Bill, which has been mentioned by several hon. Members, includes measures that will address the biggest environmental priorities of our age and ensure that the Government are held to account if we fail to meet net zero by 2050. It will place a duty on the Government to set long-term, legally binding targets on biodiversity, air quality, water, and resource and waste efficiency. It will lay the foundation for the nature recovery network that will create or restore half a million hectares of wildlife-rich habitat in England, which will encompass woodlands, peatlands, grasslands and coastal ecosystems.

David Tredinnick: I recommend going to the Knepp estate and talking to the Burrell family who run it. It is a wonderful wildlife centre.

I am listening attentively to the Minister. I apologise that I was not here at the beginning of his speech, because I was in the Chamber listening to the Prime Minister. Earlier, I raised the issue of zero-carbon medicines and treatments and sustainable healthcare. Will he have a word with the Health Secretary and share some of his experience in that field?
Zac Goldsmith: In terms of zero-carbon medicine, I will struggle to give my hon. Friend a comprehensive answer, because I do not know much about that. As one of the biggest landowners in the country, however, there is a huge amount that the NHS could do. The hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport mentioned the Opposition’s plans to require the NHS to plant 1 million trees on NHS land. That would be just a start. As we build new buildings and expand the infrastructure of the NHS, we should do so in as close to a zero-carbon and nature-friendly way as possible.

The food that is supplied to patients in hospitals should be local, sustainable and good quality, as it is in a number of hospital trusts. The Royal Cornwall Hospital Trust wins the prize every year for the most sustainable, popular and healthy food by sourcing local ingredients. There is lots that the NHS can do, but I will have to get back to my hon. Friend the Member for Bosworth (David Tredinnick) about zero-carbon medicines. I do not know a great deal about that area, but I will seek to find out more.

The Environment Bill also establishes spatial mapping and planning tools to help to inform nature recovery and, alongside the provisions in the Agriculture Bill, the actions and incentives that are needed to drive change on the ground. It establishes an office for environmental protection, with a statutory duty to hold the Government to account on our progress to improve the natural environment.

The cornerstone of our agricultural policy will be the environmental land management scheme that will replace the common agricultural policy and be a hugely powerful vehicle for delivering real change. Of everything that we have discussed, that could be the transformational policy in relation to our domestic biodiversity—if we get it right. It means that the payment of subsidies to farmers and landowners will become conditional on delivering public goods such as biodiversity, clean water, flood prevention and mitigation, and adaptation to climate change. It is potentially huge and I hope that the whole House will support it.

The Government are investing in restoring nature, at scale, at home and overseas, and we are providing leadership—I have no doubt about that. Given the scale of the problem that many hon. Members have outlined, however, I will not pretend that this or any Government are doing enough to respond to the crisis. I am absolutely determined that, as long as I am a Minister, and as long as I am in this place, we will do a great deal more. In the meantime, I urge hon. Members to support our Environment Bill and work with us through its passage, so that we can further protections for nature. I congratulate the hon. Member for Cambridge again on his speech and on raising what is, perhaps, the most important issue of all.

6.29 pm

Daniel Zeichner: On behalf of the Petitions Committee, I thank all hon. Members who have contributed. It has been a very good debate; there has been a considerable amount of agreement. I will not single out many—I know that we are possibly close to time in the main Chamber—but I will mention my hon. Friend the Member for Bristol East (Kerry McCarthy) for all the expertise that she has brought to this subject over many years. I was particularly taken with her comments on the messiness of nature, which is an important point.

Finally, I strongly echo the comments from my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) on tackling the climate and ecological emergencies together—they are absolutely interlinked. I was delighted to hear from the Minister a pretty strong pledge on ending peat burning. I will be able to go back to my constituent, Maggie, and tell her that he agrees with her, and I am sure she will hold him to all the promises on which she sought reassurance.

Question put and agreed to.
Resolved.
That this House has considered e-petition 254607 relating to restoring nature and climate change.

6.30 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Westminster Hall

Tuesday 29 October 2019

[Sir George Howarth in the Chair]

Colne to Skipton Railway Link

9.30 am

Graham P. Jones (Hyndburn) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the proposed reinstatement of the Colne to Skipton railway link.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. It is interesting that the Government have sent the heavy rail Minister to respond to the debate. I hope he will make the commitments to Colne-Skipton that we all want, about long-overdue investment. It is of course my role, as Member of Parliament for Hyndburn, to champion prosperity and encourage investment in the area for the people I represent. That is why I have been so vocal on the issue. If we reinstate transport in the area—particularly the rail link—it will provide an opportunity for east Lancashire and beyond. I thank all the MPs who have come to the debate, and the council leaders and campaigners who have brought the campaign to the place where it is today—where a serious proposition is being considered. That is testimony to their hard work. I particularly want to thank Skipton East Lancashire Rail Action Partnership for the campaign that it has run over many years, which is appreciated by all in east Lancashire and west Yorkshire.

What we are talking about is 12 miles of railway, which stands between east Lancashire and west Yorkshire—a third trans-Pennine artery that connects the two, which was taken away many years ago. It would not take a great deal of money to put that rail link back. At the heart of the issue, for many constituents, is the north-south divide. There is a grievance about the fact that little money is spent in the north, and particularly in the area I am concerned with.

Julie Cooper (Burnley) (Lab): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does he agree that the fact that we have to fight for 12 miles of railway track seems to make a mockery of the northern powerhouse?

Graham P. Jones: My hon. Friend makes two points. First, St Helens is occupied Lancashire and needs to be liberated. He is right to say that St Helens looks north towards Lancashire, but there is also a serious point to be made about the importance of connecting east Lancashire to the port of Merseyside and the support that we get from Peel Ports, which involves passing through constituencies such as St Helens North. It is also about giving people in St Helens the opportunity to look in all directions—particularly north—and to have an east-west link available through Preston and the East Lancashire line and over the Pennines. My hon. Friend is right to raise that. The north-west itself benefits from any transport infrastructure investment, wherever it is, because it allows more mobility.

Before I discuss the line itself, I want to conclude what I was saying about the Government’s broken economic model, which is just about pounds, shillings and pence, and all the investments in the south. We apply that metric to railways but not to anything else. The Government are happy to hand out grants for town centres or housing, with no expectation of any return. However, as soon as it comes to the railways, there is an expectation of an economic model with some return. The Government abandon the policy that they apply in other cases for deprived areas. I do not understand the logic of that. Surely the logic should be that if transport will bring prosperity, industry, jobs and wages, that is what we should subsidise. We should subsidise rail investment and the railways if we want to lift people out of deprivation—not titivate town centres or whatever else the Government hand out grant money to. The current system for looking at investment is broken.

Julie Cooper: My hon. Friend raises an important point about investing in prosperity and people. The Todmorden curve link is an example of what he has

I hear arguments all the time about whether the reinstatement of the line would be economically viable. When will we use different indices for transport investment? The deprivation figures came out two weeks ago and the sub-region in question is the poorest in the country. If an economic case is to be made, there will never be an economic case for the poorest sub-region: at best it will be marginal, so there will never be investment and the indices will continue to plummet as they have. At some point the Government must step back and say that deprivation indices are a reason to invest. That would be the case in most other countries. It would be a question, not of using an economic model about the viability of the line, but of whether we are investing in people. That is the question: are we investing in people, instead of trying to count pounds, shillings and pence and reinvest in London and the south?

Conor McGinn (St Helens North) (Lab): I am reluctant to say this under the chairmanship of the senior Merseyside Member, but although my constituency is in the Liverpool City Region, all points north and east from railway stations such as Rainford, Garswood and Newton, go outside Merseyside. In my constituency people feel a strong Lancashire identity. Will my hon. Friend, who is a great champion of his constituency and of transport in the north, agree that we should work across boundary lines as the old county of Lancashire on issues of transport?

Graham P. Jones: My hon. Friend makes two points. First, St Helens is occupied Lancashire and needs to be liberated. He is right to say that St Helens looks north towards Lancashire, but there is also a serious point to be made about the importance of connecting east Lancashire to the port of Merseyside and the support that we get from Peel Ports, which involves passing through constituencies such as St Helens North. It is also about giving people in St Helens the opportunity to look in all directions—particularly north—and to have an east-west link available through Preston and the East Lancashire line and over the Pennines. My hon. Friend is right to raise that. The north-west itself benefits from any transport infrastructure investment, wherever it is, because it allows more mobility.

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Julie Cooper: My hon. Friend raises an important point about investing in prosperity and people. The Todmorden curve link is an example of what he has
said. It took years of campaigning to get that short link, but the evidence in Burnley and east Lancashire is that completing that section of railway has brought investment and much-needed jobs to the region.

Graham P. Jones: My hon. Friend is right. I do not have to hand the figures for Manchester Road station in Burnley, which is on that link. It is a circuitous route. It is not the old 30 minutes direct into Manchester; it is 60 minutes. None the less, passenger numbers at Accrington station have gone from, I think, 289,000 to 469,000—or thereabouts. I may be corrected afterwards, but it is not far off. That is a huge increase in numbers since the line was put in. The reinstatement of Colne-Skipton could only add to patronage and use of the lines, and investment in those areas.

The reinstatement would probably cost about £360 million. Let me talk about that number. The Government think that £360 million for a deprived area would probably not be money well spent. Not only would it be an investment in people, but if the railway is there for 100 years it comes to £360,000 a year. That would be the capital cost, instead of millions for titivating there for 100 years it comes to £360,000 a year. That does not stand up. The Government’s policy of investing in other things and giving away grant money seems to us all about listening to mandarins in Whitehall instead of investing in and listening to local people.

Most of the route between Skipton and Colne is flat and level, and can be walked in a few hours. Some bridges need to be rebuilt, and in a couple of places—particularly at Earby—major road works are needed. However, in the words of the DFT’s 2018 report presented to the Transport Minister last December, there are “no showstoppers” preventing us from putting those 12 miles back.

As I said previously, the Skipton to Colne link has widespread support throughout the local community. It is important to say that it is also backed regionally and by businesses, and regularly features in the media. I think it is on the list of 13 schemes that the Government are considering for rail line reinstatement. The campaign has more than 500 individual paid-up members and 50 businesses are signed up, as well as other organisations. Key businesses include Peel Ports, Drax—which is having problems getting to the power plant there—and Skipton Building Society, among many.

The project also has the support of all the MPs in the area. I note that the hon. Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) is here; he is a campaigner for the rail link and I pay credit to his campaigning, as I do to that of others—I do not think there is anybody, either candidate or MP, who is against the reinstatement. We have even had co-operation from Yorkshire, and that is remarkable. We just need some signs saying, “Welcome to Lancashire” when we reinstate the line.

Julie Cooper: On the point about the widespread support for this project, does my hon. Friend agree that it is hugely disappointing that the former Secretary of State for Transport, the right hon. Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), visited and made some very positive comments, which raised hopes in the area, only to have them dashed recently?

Graham P. Jones: My hon. Friend makes a good point. We have had highs and lows on this issue that we should not have had. There has been a bit of dither and it has gone on far too long; today’s debate is about asking the Minister to make a firm commitment as we are going into a general election.

Returning to look at the service more widely, if passenger services were to go on the new Skipton to Colne railway line, they would be building on an existing success story. The Airedale line, which runs from Leeds and Bradford via Shipley and Keighley to Skipton, was modernised in the 1990s. Since then it has seen strong
growth, and the Airedale line train services are now very popular. Last year alone, over 1.2 million passengers used Skipton station. The Airedale line is often described by experts as the flagship railway line of the north, and we need just 12 miles to connect to that.

It seems very straightforward that this line should go in and connect to such a successful railway line, just 12 miles away. What it would bring to the towns of Pendle, Burnley, my own Accrington and the Hyndburn constituency, with a population in excess of a quarter of a million, would be a remarkable transformation. We would be on a new network with new opportunities. That is not an insignificant population; it is a significant population in the immediate catchment area alone. I do not include Blackburn, Ribble Valley or Preston, which are also on the line—in fact, the line goes right through to Blackpool—and would also benefit, as would areas further afield, as my hon. Friend the Member for St Helens North has said of St Helens.

The project will help not only east Lancashire, but the north-west and the north, so we must look at the wider advantages. There is a sticking-point at Earby. I admit, but as the DFT report says, I do not think this is a deal-breaker. A solution must be found that will minimise the impact on local residents, and I am mindful of that, but it is not something that cannot be overcome by engineers.

I will return briefly to mention that freight and manufacturing are a crucial issue. This is a manufacturing area; I often hear the hon. Member for Pendle say that east Lancashire is a manufacturing hub, but if it is a manufacturing hub, why do we not have a freight rail link in? Why are we not investing in this line and managing to ship goods around the world via the two ports east and west of east Lancashire? I am asking the question. Having the heavy rail Minister here, as I pointed out earlier, is important, because we must not do what is being suggested and put in light rail passenger transport. We must invest for the future, for business, for manufacturing and for prosperity—not just to transport passengers around.

I will touch on an important point at this stage. Network Rail has said to me in reply that it does not have a freight rail terminal anywhere near east Lancashire. There is an ideal site at Huncoat power station in my Hyndburn constituency, a brownfield site that is being redeveloped. I ask the Minister to comment on this: while I know these are matters for the private sector, if those 12 miles go in for heavy goods and the Government actively invest in this rail line, it is obvious that they should actively pursue a rail freight terminal for east Lancashire.

We have the road network, which at certain times is not full to capacity—a long way short of capacity, particularly in the evenings. It would serve the manufacturing base of east Lancashire if this line were put back in to the ports and beyond and we had that rail freight terminal. That is a crucial issue. If we are going to put the investment in, let us put in the other corresponding investments too.

If the project was given the go-ahead in early 2020, we could expect a new passenger service to be running as early as 2025-26. This is not a massive scheme for the DFT. It is something that we, as a nation and as a region, should be pursuing, and we should be pursuing it actively, not hesitating or holding back. This conversation has gone on for too long.

As I come to the end of my comments, I note that the proposal is backed by Transport for the North, which has provided evidence that the scheme should go ahead. It has published its report on the strategic transport plan for the next 30 years, the TTN STP, which has conclusively shown that there will be a massive and transformational boost to the deprived economy of east Lancashire, should this reinstatement go ahead. That will be achieved by bringing all of east Lancashire within one hour of central Leeds and Bradford, and improving connectivity with elsewhere. The scheme has TTN’s full support, which is worth saying, and it is part of the section of TTN’s investment programme titled: “Specific Interventions before 2027—Proposed Early Phases of Northern Powerhouse Rail and Additional TTN Priorities”. TTN is an active stakeholder, along with the Department for Transport and Network Rail, trying to help and input into the development of the scheme.

I say this with a general election possibly around the corner: we in the Labour party have committed to reinstating this link for heavy rail without hesitation. Furthermore, we have committed to electrifying this line, which is needed because the Airedale lane is electrified. I am also pretty certain that the Labour party will support private sector investment in a freight rail terminal in my constituency.

We need to move quickly, for Britain, the north and this region, but we also need to look beyond: when the east Lancs line is done, we need to start looking at the Accrington to Stubbins connection. We need to put back what was taken away and make these once-proud towns proud again. Let us put in the investment that they deserve. When the cotton industry was thriving, 25% of our economy’s foreign currency exports were derived from it and off the backs of those workers. They deserve better today, and that investment should be put in. We in the Labour party are committed to doing so as a matter of course.

Finally, I am interested to hear the Minister’s thoughts on those deprived communities and how he can stop their fall down the deprivation ladder. My hon. Friend the Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) is here. Burnley is the eighth most deprived town in the country, Blackburn is ninth and my constituency of Hyndburn is 16th. The hon. Member for Pendle is here, and he can perhaps say where Pendle is on the ladder; I think it is about 20th or 22nd. Those four constituencies, which would benefit from the proposed line, are among the poorest.

This is about investing in people. When we use metrics in considering whether to put those 12 miles of track back in, we should look at life expectancy, which is 10 years lower there than everywhere else, and we should look at the £1 billion cost to the CCG of not investing in people and leaving deprived communities to fail. Given that the railway will last for 100 years, we should not look at the small amount of £360 million and say that there is no economic return, and effectively—as happened on Merseyside—throw these people under a bus. I am interested to hear the Minister’s reply.
Andrew Jones (Harrogate and Knaresborough) (Con): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. As a former Transport Minister, I wish to make a few comments.

The biggest challenge facing our rail network is dealing with the growth that we are experiencing. Capacity is the biggest question. We have more services on our network now than at any point in British history, with 140,000 services per week, and we have more passengers on our network than ever before, with 1.8 billion passenger journeys per year. That is more than 1 billion more passengers carried on our railways every year since privatisation. A huge transformation has happened in our rail network.

That has been achieved without compromising safety—we have a fantastic safety record, which is obviously at the heart of the rail industry. The challenge is putting more capacity into our network to meet the demand, having turned this industry around from a declining to a succeeding sector. That will be met in a variety of ways. The first, which attracts most attention, is obviously the construction of new lines, including HS2 more than anything else. That is a controversial project for some, but I am a big supporter of it. We will also see capacity delivered via bigger and longer trains. The new rolling stock is transformative—just look at the new Azumas serving the east coast main line. We will also deliver capacity by opening new lines and reopening lines. That is at the heart of this project: reopening an important line that will connect Yorkshire and Lancashire.

I support this project. It is quite straightforward: it covers only 12 miles, there is existing trackbed, and it will connect people and jobs. The Minister will consider a variety of good reasons as he takes his work forward, but let me highlight some. First, the area already has congested roads, particularly in Colne—in fact, the A653 seems to end in Boundary Mill’s car park. The rest of Colne can also be quite congested. Improving public transport in the area would be one way to improve the quality of life in Colne.

Julie Cooper: Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, if we are to take the Government’s commitments on the environment seriously, at the heart of it should be a commitment to enhancing public transport?

Andrew Jones: There is absolutely no doubt that transport is a significant contributor to the carbon in our atmosphere, which is why the Government are taking action. I agree with the hon. Lady’s basic principle, but to say that the Government are not doing anything would be wrong, because there has been record investment in public transport and in our rail network, with the control period 6 budget of £48 billion being the biggest in British history. But yes, the environmental impact of improving rail connections for the people whom this line would serve would be a real enhancement and is one reason why this is a good project.

The economic case was made by the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones), and it has been made consistently by the two Members at each end of the proposed line, neither of whom can speak because they are Ministers—one of them is here. The Minister for Africa, my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), is a long-standing champion of the scheme, for all the reasons we have explored in the debate. Improving his area is his top priority. At the other end of the line, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland, my right hon. Friend the Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith), is also unable to speak, but I know that he is in support. However, it is not only the areas at both ends that the line would serve: transport connections would improve for communities much more widely. That would certainly be true of Burnley and the Aire valley, which would be clear beneficiaries, as would the Hyndburn area.

The trans-Pennine line is critical for the north of England’s economy, but it is congested. The Government are responding with a £2.9 billion trans-Pennine rail upgrade, but to really transform the northern economies we need to add capacity in lots of different ways. The trans-Pennine rail upgrade, Northern Powerhouse Rail and the Skipton to Colne line all have a role to play, which is why I am pleased that the Government are taking this project forward through its development phase.

As a former Transport Minister, I have met campaigners and businesses who have been strong in their support for the project. We should pay tribute to their tenacity in keeping going, because it is not always easy to get transport projects off the starting blocks in the United Kingdom, and tenacity is a key ingredient in doing so. I met haulage businesses and people seeking to move significant amounts of freight from one part of the country to another, as well as people who simply recognise that some parts of the north have more vacancies and some parts have people who need work, and that transport is required to connect the two.

I am afraid that I must gently challenge the hon. Member for Hyndburn, who said that the Government are not seeking to invest in the north. If we look at the data published by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority and covering the three-year period that we are right in the middle of, we see that the data from the national infrastructure and construction pipeline shows that the northern region has higher per capita transport spending than the midlands or the south—it is £248 per person for the north and £236 per person for the midlands and the south.

We can combine that with the fact that the biggest project currently underway on the railways other than HS2 is the transport and rail upgrade, and we can look at the fact that rolling stock in the north is being renewed for the first time in a generation. In only a few weeks’ time, the Minister will be able to say something that no Rail Minister has been able to say for a generation, which is that trains in the north are of a higher calibre than they have probably ever been, and they will be better than in any other part of our country.

Graham P. Jones: The hon. Gentleman offers a different perspective from that of the Institute for Public Policy Research, which says that there has been a lack of investment in the north. I simply say to him that the public will ask this about the investment that is supposed to be going into the north. “East Lancashire is very deprived; whereabouts in east Lancashire will it go? I am an east Lancashire resident—show me the money.”

Andrew Jones: I have obviously seen the IPPR reports and the claims made, which frankly I think are not correct. The methodology of its reports is flawed in lots...
of different ways. That is why it is important to go back to the authoritative figures produced by the Infrastructure and Projects Authority, which give us the data.

I think that we need more investment in transport right across the country, because I am a great believer in transport’s ability to drive economic growth, create opportunity and improve the environment. We should not spend time using methodology that is deeply flawed, frankly, simply to make a political point; we should look at the authoritative data, and I have already highlighted the numbers.

I will go back to my point about rolling stock, because this is a great opportunity for the north. We have not had decent rolling stock for a generation. The Pacers trains may have been a good idea at the time, when those who were managing our railways were taking cost out, because they were in precipitate decline. Those trains may have been the right answer then, but they are not the right answer now. That is why it is such a good thing that they are going. Many have already gone—a number went last week. We will see that continue to happen in the weeks ahead. This is not just on Northern; we are seeing new rolling stock fleets across trans-Pennine as well, and the new Azumas are entering service on the east coast main line. The transition from being utterly inadequate to having top-quality new rolling stock in the north is fantastic, and we should celebrate it.

Graham P. Jones: Will the hon. Gentleman give way just on that one point?

Andrew P. Jones: Go on then.

Graham P. Jones: As I understand it—I will stand corrected if the hon. Gentleman can tell me otherwise—the new rolling stock will not be on the section from Burnley to Colne to Pendle; that section will have revamped old stock. Can he update us on that point?

Andrew Jones: Some of the rolling stock that will be entering service across the north is indeed refurbished rolling stock. The rolling stock entering service on the Leeds-Harrogate-York line is cascaded stock that has been refurbished to a condition that is as good as new, and it is absolutely fantastic. The response from the travelling public of Harrogate has been very positive, because it is a step change from the Pacers, which have served my community for a very long time.

I do not accept the basic position of Opposition Members that the Government have failed to invest in the north and are failing to modernise, because that simply is not true. There is not just the new rolling stock and the trans-Pennine upgrade; we also have the northern hub, which is connecting Piccadilly and Victoria in Manchester. The Todmorden curve opened in 2015, following a £10 million investment, and reconnected Burnley to Manchester—I think that was the first time that service had ever been operated. Those are good examples of investment in east Lancashire that is transforming the local economies, because transport investment is a driver of economic growth. That is why the current Government have been so strong in their consistent delivery of transport investment.

May I close by urging the Rail Minister to press on with his good work as he invests, modernises the railway and recognises the benefits that it brings to communities right across the UK? This is one project that has to be considered and taken forward, for all the positive reasons that we have discussed in this debate so far, and which has been championed by my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle and others right across the area. As the hon. Member for Hyndburn said, it has support right across the political spectrum, at local and national level. For those reasons, I urge the Minister to press on.

10.5 am

John Grogan (Keighley) (Lab): It is a great pleasure to follow the hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), a fellow Member of Parliament from Yorkshire. He made a very knowledgeable speech. Indeed, it was a statesmanlike speech, following the statesmanlike speech by my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones), whom I congratulate on securing the debate.

I am a relative newcomer to this issue, on the basis that I was not re-elected to Parliament until 2017, but I have asked a number of questions on the issue, and I notice that every time I or someone else asks a question from the Labour side, there is quite rightly somewhere in the answer the line, “I am sure the hon. Member will recognise the contributions of the hon. Members for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson) and for Shipley (Philip Davies) and the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith).” I do indeed recognise that. This is an all-party campaign. We even had Northern Ireland backing us earlier in the debate. The campaign certainly unites the great counties of Lancashire and Yorkshire like nothing else.

I have discussed the issue a couple of times with the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon. Obviously, he was formerly the Government Chief Whip. I saw him on the Airedale line two or three times on a Friday evening. I would be going to the pub; he would be going back down to London to run the country. But we would have a word about this scheme, to which he is committed. In a way, I am surprised, given such heavyweight commitment and given that it is now two years since the feasibility study was announced, that more rapid progress has not been made. Obviously, I understand that people such as my good friend and parliamentary neighbour the right hon. Member for Skipton and Ripon have had other things on their mind, but I say gently that we do now need to advance this cause more rapidly.

There are advantages to the Skipton to Colne scheme—we have heard some of them mentioned—that other schemes do not have. One is speed; the potential to implement this scheme speedily is something that no other trans-Pennine option has. As my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn mentioned, the line closed in 1970. The tragedy is that it survived Beeching and then was closed in 1970. It was opened in 1848. I was interested in hearing about potential dates, if we could get going, as to when it could be reopened. We should certainly commit today to start having the line rebuilt to celebrate its 175th anniversary in 2023, because unlike other lines that potentially could take freight across the Pennines, it has a relatively short-term horizon.

The economic growth arguments have been well made, but they apply equally across the Pennines in Yorkshire. It would be a massive economic boost if people from my constituency of Keighley could commute
to Manchester—could have the option not just of Leeds and Bradford, but of Manchester. There could be holiday traffic to Manchester airport as well. This scheme could provide a great economic boost to Yorkshire as well as Lancashire.

I, too, place on the record my particular thanks to SELRAP. The last six months have been a strange period for those of us who have been campaigning on this issue, because all sorts of reports have been coming out about the nature of the Government’s feasibility study; all sorts of rumours have been coming out. I want more than rumours. SELRAP has been briefed, as have other stakeholders, by Government officials and Network Rail, but Ministers have been reluctant to put the information formally in the public domain. I therefore have a series of questions, on which I hope Ministers can help us.

What is the estimated cost of this scheme? My hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn mentioned a figure of £200 million or £300 million. Some rumours are that the Steer consultants are saying that it is more like £800 million or £900 million. Unless we can see the report, it is hard to analyse it.

There has been a great deal of debate about freight. Officials have intimated that the case for freight does not yet stack up and they are now going to look at other potential freight routes across the Pennines and how long it would take to implement them. I would have thought that after two years that work would already have been done.

Estimates for passenger traffic are now in the public domain. SELRAP tells me that the consultant’s estimate for a new park-and-ride station at Earby is a mere 40,000. Well, I am told that at Colne there are already 80,000 passengers a year, with poor rail links to the rest of Lancashire and Manchester. Skipton has 1.2 million passengers a year, as my hon. Friend for Hyndburn mentioned. There is strong support from industry, but SELRAP tells me that Peel Ports and Drax were not formally interviewed by the consultants until this September.

I watched the rugby this weekend, as I am sure many others did. South Africa were holding on against Wales in the last few minutes, looking to kick into touch. Some campaigners are saying—I cannot possibly believe it—that the officials are intimating that this scheme is not being rigorously pursued and that Ministers are looking for the touchline until a general election. I would not credit myself with such cynicism. There are growing fears among some campaigners that this is not a priority, but it should be a priority.

Across the parties, we share a belief that the towns of the north, as opposed to the great cities, have not had a great deal. The towns fund is welcome. The prospectus for the towns fund comes out this week, with £25 million for Shipley and Keighley. I am very grateful for that, but this scheme would trump that in economic benefit. It would be a symbol of the Government’s commitment to towns. Whatever happens in the election, I hope that we can make rapid progress on this.

I had a brief chat with the shadow Chancellor recently, who reminded me that he signed an early-day motion tabled by the hon. Member for Pendle in 2012. The shadow Chancellor was in the top six signatures, such was his commitment. The hon. Member for Pendle managed to get an eclectic group in the top six. He also managed to attract the support of George Galloway, so there definitely was broad support. I was pleased to see that.

Transport for the North has been mentioned. It is important. Whichever Government are in office after the next election, Transport for the North needs to go to the next stage. As well as being a partner for Government, it needs to be a strong advocate for the north and, if necessary, take a slightly different line from Whitehall. It is a challenge for John Cridland, who chairs that group. He is coming to the end of his five-year term in 2020. He was at the Confederation of British Industry for five years. He said he was a “Star Trek” fan at that point and believed in five-year journeys. I do not know whether he believes in a second term at Transport for the North.

I understand that John Cridland is on the Government’s review of high-speed rail. It is interesting that he wears those two hats. If he suggests that high-speed rail will not go to Yorkshire or, if it does, that it will go via Manchester, it will be an interesting position for the man who chairs Transport for the North and is meant to be an advocate for the north. I think he has a chance, on this issue, to come out and publicly say, “Transport for the North won’t brook further delays from Network Rail or the Department for Transport but wants a decision this year.” We might get an election for Christmas—we will have to see what happens today—but above all we want the Skipton to Colne line to get the go-ahead by the new year.

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): There is ample time available. I remind the Front-Bench speakers that they are under no obligation to fill up that time. I also remind the Minister to leave some time for the mover of the motion to respond.

10.14 am

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn (Graham P. Jones) for securing this debate. In his characteristic style, he set out a concrete case for the Skipton-Colne line. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions to this crucial debate, which is really about the future economy of the whole of the north. It is a pleasure to respond to this debate.

We are talking about just 12 miles of railway. Investment in this piece of infrastructure could be transformative for the north; that is why Labour has committed to that as part of our rail enhancement programme. If there is to be a general election, we will be eager to press ahead with this scheme, which is about rebalancing the economy. It will not only provide crucial opportunities to transport passengers and goods, but transform our economy and the opportunities for people in constituencies such as those that my hon. Friends represent.

We see major investment in the ports in Liverpool and on the Humber, but we must get the connectivity between them right. When I have discussed this with Transport for the North, it has stressed the importance of improving the trans-Pennine route, to which, I regret
to say, the Government have not given the necessary enhancement for freight passage, which is important for establishing an east-west connection. The Skipton-Colne line—the west-east line—will complete the circle, ensuring that we get proper transportation.

I have spoken to businesses in the north, particularly Drax, which would benefit greatly. It says that the line would not only bring about improvements in the transportation of biomass along the transatlantic route to Liverpool, but improve the resilience of the infrastructure. Drax also depends on Immingham port, but we know that there are flooding risks there, so to secure our energy supply, we need to ensure there is an opportunity in the east and the west. At the moment, if biomass travels around our country, it either goes south, via Birmingham, or further north. These 12 miles of connectivity would make such a difference to Drax, which receives around 24 consignments each day. There would be the opportunity for storage of additional biomass along the line, which would build up the resilience of our energy sector, so this is an important project for us.

If the trans-Pennine route had a full upgrade, it would deliver for not only freight but passengers. Reliability is no longer a consideration for this Government, but it absolutely would be for Labour. Labour committed to electrification, and then the Government did, too; but then they withdraw that offer. This is a crucial project. We can go further than that: if we get freight connectivity right, we can invest and make the northern powerhouse actually happen, because this is about the wider economy in the north.

We need a modal shift for freight from roads to rail. That is crucial because of the environmental catastrophe facing our planet, for which we are responsible. Around a third of our carbon footprint is in the transport sector. The Government have not made the necessary progress on that. We believe that modal shift will be a game changer. In the transport sector, we need a 15% reduction of our carbon expenditure, year on year, for the next 10 years. The shift from road to rail, not only for passengers, but particularly for goods, will make a big difference.

We want to open up opportunities. Labour is putting forward a smart logistics strategy that not only connects industry to the rail freight sector, but opens up more opportunities for light freight and the accompanying development of rolling stock. We also provide for a transition between passengers and goods; we will look at peaks and flows in usage and time, so that rolling stock can accommodate both. We will ensure that far more goods can be transported across the network, while also investing in passenger enhancements. Of course, Labour’s plan, which, we must remind ourselves, will bring rail back into public ownership, so that the public have real control over our network, will also ensure connectivity across the network, which will bring the enhancements that people want.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn reminded us about the investment issues. I have to agree with him that, as the research shows, the north has not been well served. The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones) raised the issue of Pacer trains; I have to relate my experience from the weekend. I was on a Pacer train travelling from York, and of course rain was pouring in through the ceiling. It is 2019! That shows the challenges that we face with our trains in the north. We need to ensure that those things move forward.

We have a genuine opportunity here to invest in freight. The line will play a crucial role in rail infrastructure, which will result in the growth of new manufacturing and reinvestment in industry in the north. Of course, if we have strong freight paths, manufacturing can become more reliant on just-in-time manufacturing processes, smart logistics, as I have highlighted, and the movement of goods on our railways.

It is vital that that economic opportunity is brought to the north. The whole northern powerhouse investment in rail, including the trans-Pennine rail route upgrade and investment in the Skipton-Colne route, could bring around 850,000 good-quality jobs to the north. We Labour MPs understand the value of that; it is in the title of our party. This is about investment delivering for local people. We want growth in those opportunities.

We also want the development of new passenger routes. We need to make sure that new housing developments are connected to our main infrastructure. We want better connectivity in planning across the country, to ensure that all investments, including in the economy and in housing, are linked to our rail network. We would then have a strong passenger offer and a strong goods offer; our infrastructure investment will deliver both those things.

I also highlight the opportunity that establishing the right connectivity between ports in the east and the west will bring about in the wider economy of the country. We are a crucial link between the rest of Europe and the Atlantic and Ireland. Better connectivity through the Skipton-Colne route could well mean that we become a proper transport path, whereby goods touch base in our country, and companies use us as a corridor for goods. Again, that is really important for economic growth and opportunity, but will also create a new transport role for the UK in Europe. This investment will not just be expenditure; it will drive revenue for the Treasury, so it is really important that we consider the overall investment programme.

My hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn talks about what will happen over the next 100 years. It is worth reminding ourselves that we are coming up to 200 years of the railways. I am sure that the annual spend he calculated will go down significantly if we bear in mind how well we build our railways and their longevity.

My hon. Friends the Members for Keighley (John Grogan), for Burnley (Julie Cooper) and for Hyndburn have highlighted that this debate is not just about infrastructure, including track and trains; it is very much about people. It is about jobs, opportunities and aspiration, which is very much what Labour wants from any investment.

Network Rail has put forward its proposals, but it is being challenged by Transport for the North, which believes that engineering can be streamlined in such a way that costs can be reduced. We will see what happens with that challenge. However, when we are considering investment, we must think holistically, as my hon. Friend has pointed out. We should consider not just the hardcore infrastructure, but the opportunity that such infrastructure opens up, including opportunity for new investment in jobs, and of course the wider returns.
The proposal before us will be transformative of the north, even though it covers only 12 miles of infrastructure. Labour is absolutely committed to opening up such opportunities for the economy and communities, and to the growth of our railways. We will schedule our enhancement programmes so that they are completed in a sequence that means that they will drive opportunity, not only for cities but, as my hon. Friends have said, for towns.

We will stretch that opportunity over a 30-year planning process. We can then schedule the jobs and the skills required to see real enhancement grow across the network, and to bring revenue back into the Treasury and, of course, the Department for Transport. That will then allow for reinvestment as we grow our public transport and freight paths. We will see that crucial modal shift and the necessary environmental change.

We are already optimistic. The hon. Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough says that his Government have really invested in public transport; we remind him that, looking at the whole of transport, his Government have cut 3,000 bus routes, and buses play a vital role in building connectivity across the whole transport system.

Andrew Jones: Will the hon. Lady give way?

Rachael Maskell: If I may, I will just finish—

Andrew Jones: I will just correct the hon. Lady on this point.

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. If the hon. Lady says she is finishing her sentence, she must be allowed to finish her sentence.

Rachael Maskell: We see the whole of the transport network—rail, buses, active travel—all working in a well co-ordinated way. I am happy to give way.

Andrew Jones: It is always fascinating to hear a Labour transport spokesman doing their very best to justify—

Rachael Maskell: I am a spokeswoman; I am not a man.

Andrew Jones: Yes—I beg the hon. Lady’s pardon. They try to justify why so little happened under the long period of Labour Government, when they electrified just 10 miles in 13 years. This Government do not cut bus routes; this Government do not operate bus routes. This Government have actually maintained their support of the bus network through the bus service operators grant, and extra funding was announced by the Chancellor in just the last few weeks. Can the hon. Lady perhaps help this debate by clarifying how much money will be required to deliver this magnificent wish list that she has just identified? Could she perhaps quantify the investment required and detail where it might come from?

Rachael Maskell: I thank the hon. Member for his intervention. He will see in the programmes that we have set out, particularly on rail, that we will repurpose current expenditure across the network that is being wasted on privatised projects, and that investment will go back into driving down costs. In fact, the rail industry says there will be a 30% saving if we put in place the scheduling that we propose. We want savings to be made from current wastage, and greater investment in driving forward and delivering our enhancement programme.

We are talking about just £360 million for this project and the opportunities that it will bring. I can commit today to Labour being right behind my hon. Friend the Member for Hyndburn and all the rail campaign groups, as well as the local councillors, who have done so much work over the years to support projects such as this.

10.28 am

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. Already you have chastised my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough (Andrew Jones), and for him to get chastised, something really bad must have happened—

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Order. If the hon. Gentleman wants to see me chastise somebody, he is going the right way about it. [Laughter.]

Chris Heaton-Harris: My word—I know when I am put in my place, Sir George. However, I was just making the point that my hon. Friend is one of the most mild-mannered men in this place, and he would never deliberately do anything to upset anybody.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Hyndburn (Graham P Jones) on securing this debate on the Colne to Skipton line. He made many a point about how my Department often gets its investment decisions wrong, so I thank him for making the case against nationalisation so well.

I thank the hon. Member for Burnley (Julie Cooper) for her contribution, and I thank the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is no longer in his place. I also thank the hon. Member for St Helens North (Conor McGinn)—or occupied Lancashire, as I believe it is now called—and the Skipton and East Lancashire Rail Action Partnership for all the work that it has done in the area.

My hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough is a former Rail Minister. In fact, he is my immediate predecessor. I know that when I remark on his comments I am, as someone said to me just before the debate, standing on the shoulders of a giant, so I am wary and I listened to his comments assiduously. I note his ongoing strong support for the project. He is absolutely right to highlight the new and refurbished rolling stock that continues to enter the northern rail market—a demonstration of the Government’s commitment to deliver on their promises to the north of our country. He also served under the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell (Chris Grayling), who, as was noted by the hon. Member for Hyndburn, visited twice to see what could be done with the project in February 2018 and January 2019. I am well aware of his long-standing and continuing support for the campaign and project.

Before I get into the main part of my speech, I should mention, as the hon. Member for Keighley (John Grogan) noted that I do all the time, my right hon. Friend the
Member for Skipton and Ripon (Julian Smith) and also my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle (Andrew Stephenson), who is sitting to my right. The two of them attended a symbolic ribbon cutting of the project in 2014. The hon. Member for Keighley mentioned the early-day motion tabled by my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle, which many people signed. I know the shadow Chancellor signed it, but I believe he was in a position at that time of signing just about every early-day motion. His support for the project was none the less welcome. My hon. Friend the Member for Pendle mentioned the project in his maiden speech, as well as in other speeches. In research for this debate I read his contributions from the Westminster Hall debate that he secured on 26 April 2017. It is good that we have strong cross-party backing for the project.

I gently remind the hon. Member for Burnley that after years of campaigning for the Todmorden curve under a previous Labour Government, it was a Conservative-led Government who invested the cash to facilitate travel between her constituency and Manchester when the line opened in 2015.

Julie Cooper: The Todmorden curve railway link would never have been made had it not been for the Labour-led Burnley Council.

Graham P. Jones: And Hyndburn Council.

Julie Cooper: And Hyndburn Council. I beg your pardon.

Chris Heaton-Harris: I remind the hon. Lady that the MP at the time, who also campaigned, was from a different party, but that is not the point.

I share the interest of the hon. Member for Hyndburn in ensuring that the corridor between east Lancashire and Yorkshire, in which the former rail line is located, has the transport infrastructure that it needs to flourish and grow. I agree that the potential role of a reopened Skipton-Colne line needs to be considered carefully. It is the case, as he kind of made clear, that the Government are investing in transport in east Lancashire and the north more widely. As he knows, the Government are committed to creating a northern powerhouse to rebalance our economy.

Investing in and fuelling the northern economy provides a great opportunity for the north to be at the forefront of the UK’s economic success for decades to come. I am a midlands MP, I welcome investment in the north because it drives investment in the midlands, too. A national benefit would flow from that. I want to gently correct, as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough did, the incorrect IPPR study of investment in the regions. As he correctly pointed out, the investment is £236 for the midlands, £236 for the south and £248 for the north. However, it does not matter because the investment continues to grow, with projects coming forth that really will drive economic growth. Our continuing commitment to transforming rail connectivity across the north is evidenced both by the Prime Minister’s recent announcement on Northern Powerhouse Rail and the continued development of and investment in the trans-Pennine route upgrade programme.

As the Prime Minister reminded us when he visited Rotherham a few weeks ago, the north gave the world the railway. He said:

“...and yet two centuries later, in this birthplace of the railways, we can do so much better.”

When he was in Yorkshire the previous week he reaffirmed his commitment to Northern Powerhouse Rail and slightly challenged people by saying that he eagerly awaited the emergence of the plans. He also noted that there has been significant Government investment, with 2,000 additional services now operating every week, £500 million on new trains and £100 million on refurbishment of the rest of the fleet, including wi-fi and power sockets as well as the electrification of the railways in the north-west. A huge amount has gone in.

Before I turn to the Colne-Skipton line, I want to highlight the significant transport investment already under way in Lancashire and across the north to support the northern powerhouse programme. Through the growth deal process, the Government have provided the Lancashire local enterprise partnership with £8 million to support the Hyndburn Burnley/Pendle growth corridor investment, designed to maximise the benefits provided by the M65 in that corridor. Our third growth deal with the Lancashire LEP provides further funding for the M65 corridor—junctions 4 to 6—which will bring further benefit to east Lancashire and the constituents of the hon. Member for Hyndburn. It was my hon. Friend the Member for Pendle who pushed for a study of the work. He is a very busy Member of Parliament.

I am sure the hon. Member for Hyndburn is aware of the proposals for the Colne to Foulridge—or A56 villages—bypass. When consulting on its east Lancashire highways and transport master plan in the autumn of 2013, Lancashire County Council set out six possible options for the scheme. It identified two that would potentially impact on the reinstatement of the railway at a future date. I understand that Lancashire County Council has not actively developed the options any further, pending the outcome of a centrally funded Highways England study that is under way.

More widely in east Lancashire we have, through the LEP, funded improvements to the Blackburn to Bolton rail corridor, and have enabled a more frequent service to operate between Blackburn and Manchester Victoria. That is not the first improvement that we have delivered on the rail network between east Lancashire and Greater Manchester. Thanks to our regional growth fund, under the coalition we reinstated the Todmorden curve, which the hon. Member for Burnley mentioned in her intervention. As part of the Great North Rail project, we have invested in improvements across the region. That is bringing major improvements to the northern rail network, one of the largest rail networks in the country, creating better journeys for passengers, supporting trade and creating, as the hon. Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell) would like, a stronger economy.

Through the Northern and TransPennine Express franchises and investment in modern trains, we are delivering a host of better, more comfortable, more frequent, faster and more direct journeys. All the Pacer trains, which were possibly once loved but have absolutely outstayed their welcome, will be replaced by a mix of brand-new trains and trains refurbished and upgraded to an as-new standard. Investment in the northern rail network includes improvements to the Calder Valley...
line between Manchester, Rochdale and Bradford and Leeds—the other key current rail link in the central trans-Pennine corridor—and includes line speed improvements and improved signalling, resulting in increased resilience, more capacity and improved journey times. That is good progress, but we need to go further.

For the Hyndburn constituency, our investment has meant more frequent, hourly Sunday services to Colne from May 2018 and additional funding for the East Lancashire community rail partnership. As part of Northern’s £500 million investment, passengers in the constituency of the hon. Member for Hyndburn will benefit from new trains on the York to Blackpool service via Accrington later this year.

Finally, the Department announced in March 2019 that Highways England would work with Transport for the North on a study looking at options for improving road links between the M65 and North and West Yorkshire. The output of that study will inform consideration of the case for future investment. Those are all important building blocks of the northern powerhouse.

The line from Colne to Skipton was closed in 1970. The Skipton East Lancashire Rail Action Partnership, which is possibly one of the best action groups I have come across in my short time as Rail Minister, and certainly one of the most effective—I think I had a letter from the group two days after I was announced as Minister—was established in spring 2001 to protect the former railway track bed from development so that it could, in due course, be reinstated. As I have detailed, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Harrogate and Knaresborough said, former Rail Ministers have met the partnership many times, and I join them in paying tribute to its work over the past 18 years to raise the profile of the case for reinstating the 12-mile link between east Lancashire and Yorkshire.

The hon. Member for Hyndburn will be glad to hear that the Skipton-Colne scheme is clearly referenced as a scheme in the “determine” phase of the rail enhancements pipeline published earlier this month. As my officials outlined at last week’s meeting, hosted in Westminster by the hon. Gentleman, the focus of that phase is on establishing the case for progressing the scheme. That means identifying the improved outcomes sought for passengers, freight and the wider economy, and considering a wide range of potential interventions that could deliver those benefits.

The Government assess the case for progressing schemes through a five-case business case that takes fully into account the wider strategic and social case for investment, in addition to economic, financial, commercial and managerial aspects. We remain committed to enhancing rail connectivity across the north. The ongoing work on Skipton-Colne makes a very important contribution to that, particularly on the important issue of the provision of capacity and gauge for trans-Pennine freight.

The first stage of feasibility work carried out last year confirmed the engineering feasibility of reinstating a rail link between Colne and Skipton to modern railway standards. It also confirmed the strategic case for a rail link between east Lancashire, which has local authority districts that the hon. Gentleman himself described as the most economically deprived in England, and the Leeds city region, as well as for improved rail connectivity for freight between Mersey and east coast ports and inland terminals.

The hon. Gentleman will recall that during a visit to Colne earlier this year, my right hon. Friend the Member for Epsom and Ewell, the former Secretary of State for Transport, announced that he had asked for further feasibility work to be carried out, in order to challenge the cost of the scheme and to establish whether there would be sufficient freight demand, before making a decision on whether a reinstatement scheme should progress to the next stage of the rail enhancements pipeline.

I thank the hon. Member for Keighley for highlighting the towns fund, which will hopefully help towns and communities across his constituency and the north in general. He raised a couple of questions about the feasibility study. I am happy to share the December 2018 strategic outline business case with the partnership, so that it can understand the sorts of issues that we rightly have to tackle as a Government to ensure that the criteria that we have set are fulfilled, and that we can deliver projects that offer value for money and deliver the required economic outputs. Perhaps that can be the hon. Gentleman’s Christmas present. It is not quite the Christmas present that he asked for, but it is part of the way to it.

There are lots of important considerations, because there are challenges for the project. I am sure that the project can answer those challenges, but it is important to highlight them so that they are open and public, and so that people can work together to overcome them, as I believe has been the case up until this point. The first consideration was the initial finding that the economic case for reinstatement was quite poor without provision for, and extensive use of, the route for intermodal trans-Pennine container freight traffic attracted from road. We need to ensure that that can be delivered.

Before the feasibility study, there was insufficient evidence that the route would attract a sufficient volume of intermodal container traffic. There is evidence that other trans-Pennine routes, with necessary enhancement of capacity and gauge, could offer shorter journey times, and thus more efficient utilisation of rail assets—both staff and rolling stock. I am aware of the extensive work being done, and that has already been completed, by SELRAP, right hon. and hon. Members, and local businesses, as demonstrated by some of today’s speeches, to estimate what level of local freight could be expected. That work is very helpful indeed.

We must always address concerns about the high estimated capital cost of the scheme—questioned by the hon. Member for Hyndburn—which is relevant to both the economic case and the general affordability of the scheme. The first stage of the further work carried out by my Department’s technical advisers is nearing completion. It has been carried out in close collaboration with Transport for the North, Network Rail and the Chartered Institute of Logistics and Transport, with very helpful in-depth discussions with a number of freight customers. That work, which is continuing, suggests, first, that a high proportion of potential trans-Pennine intermodal container traffic could be carried on a low-floor wagon that requires a loading gauge that is smaller than the W12 gauge provided on a number of other trunk routes, and only marginally larger than the minimum current clearance on trans-Pennine routes.
Secondly, routing freight via Skipton-Colne is not only slower than other potential routes but engages a capacity bottleneck—as was mentioned in passing—on the eastern side of the Pennines, crossing the eastern approach to Leeds station. That is absolutely not insurmountable, but it does need to be addressed as we move forward.

Thirdly, we have confirmation that future demand for the key flows in question—Liverpool-Drax biomass and intermodal containers—is really sensitive to the end-to-end journey times that can be achieved, due to the impact on resource utilisation, so we need to work with those companies to ensure that there is a business case that works for us all.

Network Rail’s order of magnitude cost estimates are not inappropriately high, given the current state of the project’s development. However, further discussions are in progress with Transport Scotland, as the hon. Member for Hyndburn highlighted, regarding the Borders railway, as it appears that its out-turn costs were, per mile, much lower than Network Rail’s early estimates for the Skipton-Colne link. We are therefore trying to learn from what has gone on elsewhere, because we want to drive value for money.

Rachael Maskell: I am really interested in what the Minister has to say. There seems to be an overengineering of a number of rail projects at their inception. Is the Department reviewing the way that infrastructure projects are approached, so that they are appropriately engineered?

Chris Heaton-Harris: The whole point of the pipeline is to try to do exactly that, and to learn from previous projects, when things are delivered late and run over cost and when things are delivered within budget. Network Rail is going out of its way to learn from those projects, so yes, I can give the hon. Lady that assurance. That is a high assurance.

We need to investigate a number of issues further before any conclusions are drawn, hence the need for the current process. Those issues essentially boil down to the two questions that I outlined: what are the likely costs, including gauge clearance, of creating viable timetable paths in the short and medium term for additional freight, and what levels of freight traffic is the route likely to attract? We are pressing on with that work, including through a Network Rail feasibility study on trans-Pennine gauging, which was announced last month, so that we will have a complete picture in a few months. My officials will continue to update the campaign’s project development team as the work progresses. We will continue to do all we can to answer the questions that I have raised and recent work has raised, which will hopefully mean that we can work together to move this interesting and popular scheme forward.

To conclude, I congratulate the hon. Member for Hyndburn and SELRAP on the continuing commitment to this issue that they have shown, as well as the other right hon. and hon. Members with an interest in this matter—both those who could be present today and those who could not. I repeat that the Government are keen to reach an early conclusion on what role a reinstated line could play in improving passenger and freight connections across the Pennines. Given the current phase that this scheme finds itself in, my focus, and the Government’s, is on establishing the case for progressing it.
Member for Keighley said, there is no better time than the 175th anniversary of the opening of the original line. Let us get the shovels in the ground.

The Minister mentioned value for money. Is it not about time that we get local contractors and local people in? This is a deprived area. Why are we not bringing in local contractors to do some of this basic work, such as the trackbed work, which does not require engineering?

Chris Heaton-Harris: European procurement rules.

Graham P. Jones: It does not matter. That does not excuse us from bringing in local contractors to do some of the most basic work, lowering the costs. We do not always have to bring in experienced contractors from the south on high-value contracts; that does not serve the cost analysis very well. I do not think that affordability, cost and value for money should be the drivers of this particular scheme.

My hon. Friend the Member for Keighley was right to say that Christmas could have come early for us all if the Minister had committed to this rail line, but he has not. My hon. Friend the Member for York Central (Rachael Maskell), who gave a very good speech, rightly suggested that it is about time that we brought the railways into public ownership so that we can make these decisions, instead of their being made by consultants and outside bodies. Local, democratically elected people should decide what is best for their local communities, not some of the experts who have failed east Lancashire.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered the proposed reinstatement of the Colne to Skipton railway link.

10.56 am

Sitting suspended.

Liverpool City Council Funding

11 am

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op): I beg to move,

That this House has considered the funding of Liverpool City Council.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir George. Liverpool has borne the brunt of a decade of austerity. Massive cuts in Government funding have hit the council hard, combined with benefit changes that have hit the poorest and most vulnerable hardest. I pay tribute to all those who work across public services in Liverpool, who do their utmost to deliver the best services. Last Friday I visited the fantastic Mab Lane Primary School in my constituency, which serves a community with high levels of social and economic need. The headteacher, Laura Morgan, provides truly inspirational leadership in a school that is making a real difference to the life chances of children, and therefore to the local community.

Liverpool City Council tells me that, when adjusted for inflation, it has £436 million less to spend each year than it did in 2010, which equates to an overall budget cut of 63%. As a result, Mayor Joe Anderson has warned that the council faces its “worst financial crisis since the Second World War”, with a £57 million budget gap in the coming year.

In those bleak circumstances, the council held an emergency budget meeting last month, where the finance director, Mel Creighton, publicly addressed the chamber for the first time. She said:

“We have gone as far as we can go—the next decisions we make will be very difficult ones.”

The city has exhausted its reserves; it has just £16 million remaining. If those reserves were used for day-to-day services, they would last about a fortnight. After that, there would be nothing left.

Luciana Berger (Liverpool, Wavertree) (LD): I commend the hon. Gentleman for securing the debate on behalf of the city and people of Liverpool. Does he agree that that council meeting was an extraordinary example of people from across the city of all political persuasions coming together to back a motion that went to the council that said they wanted an urgent meeting with Government Ministers to set out the situation? We have that opportunity today to say that, party politics aside, Liverpool will be unable to continue in the current vein if something is not done urgently to address the serious situation.

Stephen Twigg: The hon. Lady’s intervention precisely anticipates my next paragraph.

At that unprecedented meeting, members of the Labour, Liberal Democrat, Green and Liberal parties agreed unanimously on a call for urgent action from the Treasury. Liverpool MPs, led by my hon. Friend the Member for Garston and Halewood (Maria Eagle), have echoed the call for an urgent meeting with the Secretary of State. To echo the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger), I ask the Minister whether the Government will meet Liverpool’s Mayor, MPs and
councillors as a matter of urgency to look at ways in which the Government can help to address Liverpool’s perilous financial situation.

There is an inherent unfairness in the way that local government funding is allocated. The Government use core spending power as a measure. Their figures show that had Liverpool been subjected to only the average reduction in support for all authorities, it would be £77 million a year better off. Instead, since 2010 there has been a dramatic reduction in Liverpool City Council’s spending power while the spending power of other authorities has increased. For example, Surrey County Council’s spending power has increased by £65 per household in the same period.

In authorities such as Liverpool—and next-door Knowsley, Sir George—with a high level of deprivation, a large proportion of properties are typically in the lower council tax bands, for which higher Government grants have compensated. Since 2010, however, support from the Government has been reduced as they have sought to offset austerity by allowing local authorities to raise more taxation locally. The difficulty is that 60% of dwellings in Liverpool are in the lowest council tax band, whereas the national figure is about a quarter. Liverpool’s council tax base is further reduced by the number of dwellings that qualify for discounts and exemptions.

If Liverpool’s tax base were comprised of the same proportion of households in each council tax band and the same proportion of households that qualify for discounts and exemptions as the national average, the city council estimates that it would generate more than £100 million extra in council tax every year. Surely we need to address that issue of fairness. Will the Government seriously consider the Mayor of Liverpool’s proposal for a royal commission on local government funding to ensure that a fair funding formula can be adopted across the country?

Despite all that, the council has managed to continue to prioritise services for the most vulnerable in our community. In the last year it has spent £12 million on support to help prevent people becoming homeless and on assisting rough sleepers. It has spent almost £3 million on the citizens support scheme that it set up to help residents in short-term crisis to meet their needs for food and other essential items. That has provided a lifeline for some of the city’s most vulnerable residents after the abolition of the discretionary social fund. The mayoral hardship fund continues to provide vital support for some of the city’s most vulnerable people. Spending on discretionary housing payments, which support people struggling to pay their rent, has gone up by 12%.

I pay tribute to Mayor Joe Anderson and councillors from all parties for taking action to protect the most vulnerable families who have been left struggling and worrying about how they will pay for essentials. The support that the council has been able to provide stands between many families and destitution.

I also thank the vibrant voluntary and community sectors, including the Merseyside Law Centre, formerly Merseyside Welfare Rights; St Andrew’s Community Network, which is based in the constituency of my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, Walton (Dan Carden); and the Alt Valley Community Trust. I volunteer monthly at the north Liverpool food bank at St John’s church in Tuebrook, so I see the great need in our communities and the fantastic role that the voluntary and community sectors play, alongside the city council, in seeking to protect some of the most vulnerable.

Luciana Berger: The hon. Gentleman is making an impassioned case, for which I thank him. Further to his important acknowledgement of the contribution that voluntary and charitable organisations make, I particularly commend the work of Liverpool Charity and Voluntary Services, without which many small organisations would not have been able to pursue their ambitions. At a time of decreasing funds, LCVS has gone above and beyond to support many small organisations to have the infrastructure, resources, tools and expertise to deliver vital local services.

Stephen Twigg: The hon. Lady is absolutely right to put on the record the amazing contribution that LCYS makes, as do similar councils in other parts of the country. In the 12 years that I have been in Liverpool, I have been struck by the strong sense of community and the sorts of organisations that come out of some of the most socially and economically deprived communities, some of which I mentioned. I can imagine how much worse the impact of those cuts in Government support would have been if it were not for the great work done by LCVS and some of the other voluntary organisations to which I referred.

The reality is that the council faces a near-impossible challenge: when services are needed most, it has fewer resources with which to respond. The Association of Directors of Children’s Services calculates that the number of statutory responsibilities for local authorities in children’s services has gone up by something like 50% since 2011. We need an urgent review of the financing of statutory services to ensure that they are adequately resourced, because otherwise there is a real risk that we will fail the most vulnerable people again.

The city council is pioneering new technologies to combat climate change. Liverpool has set the bold aim of becoming the world’s first climate-positive city by the end of next year, which would mean the city would remove more carbon dioxide from the atmosphere than it emits each year. The council is working alongside the Poseidon Foundation to help offset its carbon emissions by incorporating blockchain technology into the day-to-day operations of the city council. Reflecting the challenges of climate change, the council recently declared a climate emergency. It is crucial that the Government work with the council and local community to ensure that the funding and support is there, so that we can respond fully to the scale of the climate emergency.

The city council has also been innovative and ambitious in seeking to deal with the desperate financial situation that it faces—for example, it has been pioneering in its Invest to Earn strategy, generating income through investments in the private sector that can then be ploughed back into support for local services. The council has relied heavily on the Public Works Loan Board for low-interest loans to invest in the purchase of assets that can be used to generate new revenue streams and grow the local economy. It is very concerning that the Treasury has now announced an increase of an entire percentage point in the interest rate for the Public Works Loan Board.
[Stephen Twigg]

Board. The city council is doing all it can to mitigate the impact of austerity, but the interest rate increase will make that task more difficult.

Decisions made by Governments since 2010 have resulted in poverty becoming more entrenched for many of my constituents. We have now had the latest English indices of multiple deprivation, and Liverpool ranks third. Almost a quarter of the population of Liverpool live in income-deprived households, and around a third of children are growing up in poverty. The high level of need, which results in demand for services, cannot be met solely by a council tax base that, as I have said, is low. We desperately need a fairer funding deal.

Dan Carden: Does my hon. Friend agree that the imposition of universal credit, which is very much a political decision by the Government, has only added to the woes of the most vulnerable people in our city? I pay tribute to him, and to the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger). We could be heading into a general election very soon, and they have been part of the Merseyside community for the past 10 years. I pay tribute to them for all the work they have done in this place to raise the issues of poverty and the most vulnerable people.

Stephen Twigg: I thank my hon. Friend and neighbour for his kind words, and I echo his comments about our friend, the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree. He is absolutely right about the impact of universal credit and, before that, other changes—for example, the reductions in disability benefits and the introduction of the bedroom tax. That combination of factors has been significant in contributing to the challenges that the city council faces.

I am proud that Liverpool City Council has managed to keep delivering vital services and has done its best to protect some of the most vulnerable people, but the city now faces a budget gap that the council estimates to be £57 million, and it has just £16 million left in the reserves. Something surely has to give. The city council, the Members of Parliament and the entire city are united in saying to the Government that we want a fairer funding settlement that genuinely reflects the real levels of need in the local community. My concern is that if this is not put in place, we risk losing crucial services that our most vulnerable constituents rely on every day.

I hope that the Minister can give us some hope that there is light at the end of the tunnel. I particularly hope that he can address the two specific requests for a meeting and for the Government to consider a royal commission on local government funding, because many of the issues faced by my constituents in Liverpool are faced by other communities across Merseyside, across the north-west and, indeed, across the country.

11.14 am

The Minister for the Northern Powerhouse and Local Growth (Jake Berry): It is a pleasure to appear under your chairmanship, not for the first time, Sir George. With a general election looming, and given that there are marginal seats across north-west England, it might be the last time for a while.

I am proud to have been born in Aigburth, to have attended Liverpool College, and to have spent my entire life before the age of 18 living in the great city of Liverpool, so I was really keen for the opportunity to respond to the debate. I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate, which is important not just for his constituents, but for north-west England. As a fellow north-west MP, I think a thriving Liverpool city region is about creating a thriving northern powerhouse.

I want to focus briefly on facts, because the hon. Gentleman talked a lot about the role Liverpool has played in cutting the deficit since the economic crash of 2007-08. I do not want to get into the politics of what might or might not have caused the crash, but it is absolutely clear that in an environment of reducing budgets, local government across our United Kingdom—but particularly in England, for the purposes of this debate—has played its part. However, the core spending power in Liverpool has increased every year since 2015; the increase this year will be some £9.2 million. I hope that reflects the fact that we are moving from a decade or thereabouts of recovery to one of renewal, in which local authorities must play their part, as an economic partner of Government, in driving the wider economy.

Wider investment in the Liverpool city region is so important to the hon. Gentleman’s constituents, and the constituents of other hon. Members; I am sure they would want me to focus briefly on that, before I address the two questions raised in the debate. I was really pleased that £172 million from the transforming cities fund went to the Liverpool city region. Having spent a considerable period of my life going around south Liverpool on a bike, and given that we are looking to address the climate emergency, which Liverpool City Council has been very forward-thinking in bringing to the fore, I was pleased to hear that £16 million of the fund will be invested in walking and cycling infrastructure in the city.

Another £460 million will be invested in the Merseyrail system—the Liverpool tube system, as it was described to me by a friend from London who recently visited the city. I went to school on those trains, sometimes via a slightly roundabout route. For my first job, I used to travel on the Merseyrail from Cressington station all the way to Moorfields. The trains were pretty terrible 20 years ago—or even 35 years ago, when I used to get them. I am very pleased that the money, which comes from a partnership between the council, the Liverpool city region and the Government, will be invested in the transport infrastructure.

Those of us who have spent long periods of our life sat on the Runcorn bridge will agree that the £1 billion invested in the new Mersey Gateway—£600 million was direct Government funding—shows the Government’s ambitions for the region. Many of those ambitions have been focused through the Liverpool city region devolution deal; the core funding for the devolution deal is some £900 million over the initial period. More importantly, it is about taking power, money and influence away from Whitehall and returning it to the great city of Liverpool. Those of us who grew up there in the 1980s know that Liverpool is rejuvenated, and has undergone a renaissance since the very dark days of deprivation, industrial decline and political chaos. The devolution deal is a really important step in ensuring that the renaissance continues.
I do not have to tell any MPs here who represent Merseyside seats, including you, Sir George, that Liverpool is the only city ever to have had its own Department in Whitehall. At one point, Liverpool contributed more to the Exchequer than the entire City of London. Arguably, Liverpool is the city that invented globalisation, and it certainly has always had the mercantile economy at its heart. Anything we can do to drive jobs and growth back into the city is something that we should work on together.

Stephen Twigg: I am a strong supporter of the city region devolution. The deal the Minister describes is welcome. However, the strong sense in Liverpool is that what the Government have given the city region with one hand does not make up for what they had taken away with the other, particularly from some of our most deprived communities. Does he recognise that concern?

Jake Berry: I will come on to address the hon. Gentleman’s specific points, but it is worth focusing on what happened in Liverpool. Across this House, we want to be optimistic for the people we represent, and there is real optimism in Liverpool. There are challenges, and have been for as long as I have known the city, which is my entire life, but on many occasions, sometimes in this building, people from across public life want to talk down to Liverpool. I want this debate to be an opportunity to celebrate everything that is fantastic about that city.

Luciana Berger: I share with my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and the Minister their categorisation of Liverpool as that vibrant, optimistic and positive city. Over the course of what will soon be a decade, however, the city has done so much in spite of the Government, and not because of it. My hon. Friend laid out many things that have happened, and I have a whole list in front of me of cuts, including to our fire service, the police service, the health grant formula—that is the current reality—or the early intervention grant to give every child born in Liverpool the best chance of the best start in life. Despite the cumulative impact of all those things, Liverpool has soldiered on—but that does not take away from the reality of what the city is contending with after nearly 10 years of cuts.

Jake Berry: It will come as no surprise to the hon. Lady that I disagree with her. Lots of what I am talking about—the £900 million devolution deal, the £1 billion for the Gateway crossing, the £330 million from the local growth fund, and the £140 million upgrade of Lime Street station, which I am pleased about, because it was awful when I was growing up, and it is a fantastic building now—is a partnership. I hope that this debate can be about what Liverpool, the Government, the mayors and the metro Mayor can do together to drive the city. I know that is the spirit in which the hon. Lady would wish me to respond to the debate.

Liverpool City Council has some challenges with funding, as well as other issues. It has £100 million of uncollected council tax arrears, which it should do something about, because that is very high from a national perspective. Its chief executive’s remuneration package is £461,823, which is absurd and not something that should be supported by the council, although it is, because it will have been voted on by the council. In fact, the council has 57 employees across Merseyside who earn more than £100,000 each. The age of austerity might be writ large over many parts of the council, but it has not yet reached the chief executive’s remuneration package, and there are things that the council could do, such as recover some of the £100 million of council tax arrears.

The partnership approach, however, which I hope Members across the House support, is part of the story of renaissance in Liverpool. I agree with the spokesman for Liverpool City Council who, earlier this year, said that Liverpool is undergoing a regeneration boom, with £14 billion of development schemes being delivered or in the pipeline. I pay tribute to the work of the city council in transforming the city, despite having maybe played its part in the decade of recovery from the global economic crash. Despite reductions in the amount of money the city has to spend, it is thriving and booming. People do not need to take my word for it, because anyone can visit the city—in fact, I recommend that they do. And we have not even talked about having the best football team in Europe, although that might be controversial; I do not know whether any Evertonians are present.

Why does all that matter? It matters because the Government are serious about delivering a northern powerhouse—a growing northern economy for all our constituents, including mine and yours, Sir George. Liverpool must be at the heart of that regeneration, and of the renewal of the north of England. That is why I am so pleased that the Prime Minister recently set out his agenda to level up all the powers of the metro Mayors—to ensure that Steve Rotheram has the same powers as Andy Burnham—so that we can drive Liverpool’s economy. I fully support that, and I hope and believe that Steve Rotheram, who has had discussions with me and with the Prime Minister about that agenda, will come out in support of it.

That is also why we have levelled up education funding. The hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby, started the debate by talking about a school in his constituency, and I echo his tribute to all those working in our public services in Liverpool, Merseyside, the wider north-west and our entire country. That is why we are increasing funding for the NHS and the number of police on our streets. It is the poorest in our society, wherever they may be in England, who rely most heavily on the NHS and public services. That is why I applaud the Prime Minister’s ambition to level up.

Stephen Twigg: I welcome the additional powers for the city region Mayor, and I pay tribute to Steve Rotheram for his work. I absolutely echo what the Minister said about the renaissance in the city centre, but I represent suburban east Liverpool, and it does not always feel that way in some of the communities that I represent. They are much more reliant on the council services that I focused on in my speech, so I am absolutely with him on the importance of the city region and investment in it, but we need to ensure that the basic services get their funding as well.

Jake Berry: I accept that. In my penultimate point, I will address the two points raised by the hon. Gentleman about the real purposes of the debate. First, on an
urgent meeting, I am not able to promise that the Secretary of State will meet the hon. Gentleman and his colleagues urgently. However, I am more than happy to meet them myself, which is a promise that I can make. I am sure that he will be in touch, or my private office will be in touch—subject to the limited opportunity that might be available if the election motion passes today. If it is at all possible, I will certainly do that. I have always taken great pride in being from Liverpool. In fact, my grandparents lived in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency, in a place called Hayman’s Green, just behind the village centre in West Derby, so I know his constituency extremely well.

Finally, on the royal commission, the future of local government funding is something that would of course be set out in a Budget, but it appears that we will not have a Budget before 6 November. I suggest that the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby, keeps a close eye on what might be in a Budget. However, I reassure him on the point about the proportion of council tax properties in different bands. Since 2016-17, distribution of resources in the central grant system has taken into account the banding of council tax and business rates payers in the city. We believe that we have addressed that, which historically has been a major problem for cities such as Liverpool.

In conclusion, I hope that the hon. Gentleman, like me, occasionally gets the opportunity to visit the Pier Head. When I do, I look at the “Three Graces” buildings, including the Royal Liver building and the Cunard building, and all the fantastic architecture, and I am always struck by the fact that those buildings show their best face to the world. In fact, the back of the buildings, facing Saint Nick’s church, are relatively plain. Their best face looks out to sea, and that is what Liverpool has always done and will continue to do. After we leave the European Union, a global Britain can be led once again by a global Liverpool.

Sir George Howarth (in the Chair): Before I bring the proceedings to a conclusion, I use the privilege of the Chair to thank the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) and the hon. Member for Liverpool, Wavertree (Luciana Berger) for the service that they have given. I also wish them well in the future, whichever direction that may take them.

Question put and agreed to.

11.28 am

Sitting suspended.

Endometriosis Workplace Support

[Mark Pritchard in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Alec Shelbrooke (Elmet and Rothwell) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered endometriosis workplace support.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. This issue affects not just the Minister’s Department, but the Department of Health and Social Care, the Department of Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy, the Department for Education and the Department for Work and Pensions.

I thank Dr Larisa Corda, who is an obstetrician, gynaecologist and fertility expert—she is in the Public Gallery—the many hundreds of women who have contacted me, and the very brave women who have made the journey to London today to support this debate. I will not reveal the names of the people who have written to me even if they are happy for me to do so, because I want to maintain their confidentiality and ensure that it remains their choice. In opening the debate, I will cover the following areas: the disease itself; the poor diagnosis and medical expertise in dealing with this debilitating condition; its impact on women’s lives; its impact on workplace activity; and the protections that many women feel are not honoured, despite strong workplace health assessment laws.

The disease is often described as cells from the womb growing in other places, but that is a gross underestimation. I believe that that simplistic description is among the reasons why women find it hard to get employers to understand the terrible condition that they are suffering from. According to Dr Corda, since the start of this year more than 100 women have taken their lives as a direct result of this disease.

Endometriosis comes with many symptoms, which occur not just at the time of a woman’s period. The most common are abdominal cramps, back pain, severe menstrual cramps, abnormal or heavy bleeding, painful bowel movements, pain urinating, painful sex, difficulty becoming pregnant, and nausea or sickness. According to endometriosis.org, people with endometriosis are more at risk of several diseases. The risk of ovarian cancer is 37% higher than for the general public; the risk of endocrine tumours is 38% higher than for the general public; the risk of kidney cancer is 26% higher than for the general public; the risk of thyroid cancer is 33% higher than for the general public; the risk of brain tumours is 27% higher than for the general public; the risk of malignant melanoma is 23% higher than for the general public; and, according to cardiosmart.org, a heart attack is 62% more likely. That series of statistics does not describe the impact of the symptoms; I will give some real-life examples later, but the stark truth is that 30% to 50% of women become infertile from the disease.

Tracey Crouch (Chatham and Aylesford) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend on securing this incredibly important debate. I am sure millions of women around the country will be enormously grateful that he is raising this issue at the highest level. Does he agree that one of the challenges that many people face is that there is a significant lack of understanding of the condition?
That leads to all sorts of things, including dreadful delays in diagnosis and a lack of understanding in workplaces of what the chronic pain really means to those women.

Alec Shelbrooke: My hon. Friend summarises the biggest issues that those women face. I will talk about the real-life experiences of the women who have contacted me, but one of the most important things—I hope other Members will expand on this—is that there are support networks out there, because women often suffer in silence.

As I said, this subject goes beyond the DWP: certainly, the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care have a role to play.

In June 2015, the BBC carried out a study on 15,000 women in Scotland. It found that women with the condition had a 76% chance of miscarriage, which is unbelievably high. The article reported that women with endometriosis had a trebled risk of ectopic pregnancy. The chance of premature birth was 26% and the chance of having a caesarean was 40%.

Later, I will talk about the impact on women of abnormal and heavy bleeding and bowel movement impacts, which can be distressing in the workplace. I am aware that the issue I am about to talk about falls under the authority of the Department of Health and Social Care, but it is vital to add context and explain why this disease has a knock-on effect in the workplace. I ask the Minister to ensure that this debate is fed into the relevant Ministers in the Department of Health and Social Care.

The House of Commons digital engagement team put out a survey only last Thursday, and there have been 2,610 responses, 1,083 reactions, comments and shares on Facebook, and 215 retweets. I want to cite some of the quotes from it. Again, I will not put the names out there; I will just set out the reports.

“At 18 I am currently being put through medically induced menopause to try and fight back against my endo, it’s horrific, it’s debilitating and it’s exhausting. The pain I have I cannot even describe, and two operations later I am no further to being pain free or living a normal life. My next step is a hysterectomy, but it is important to set out the context. Another lady said: ‘At 18 I am currently being put through medically induced menopause to try and fight back against my endo, it’s horrific, it’s debilitating and it’s exhausting. The pain I have I cannot even describe, and two operations later I am no further to being pain free or living a normal life. My next step is a hysterectomy, but it is important to set out the context. Another lady said: ‘

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for securing this incredibly important debate. One in five women will suffer from this disease, and it has been shown that, as that story shows, it can take up to seven years to convince a doctor. That is completely unacceptable. We have an issue in this country with what has been called the gender pain gap. We need to put more money into research and funding to look at proper cures and support for women when they need it most.

Alec Shelbrooke: I entirely agree with those sentiments. As I said, I hope this debate will go beyond the Department for Work and Pensions. I thank the hon. Lady for that contribution; it is spot on.

Endometriosis affects 1.5 million women in the UK. It takes an average of eight years to diagnose and there is not really a cure.

I will share a few examples from women who have spoken out through the digital platform. One said: ‘I had stage 4 (severe) endometriosis. I had a 7 year wait for diagnosis. From my referral to the hospital, I had a year and a half wait for surgery. My surgery was lifesaving as my bowel was 50% blocked with a mass of adhesions that had grown through the bowel. I was in constant pain, slept for 3 or 4 hours a day and was unable to care for my son properly. I considered putting him into care. If it wasn’t for him, I would have given up on everything. Despite being told in 2010 I ‘probably had endometriosis’ I was still given painkillers and mefenamic acid for years to manage the pain and symptoms. Throughout this time the endo was worsening, it is progressive. Had I been diagnosed earlier I may not have needed the bowel resection I needed and will have bowel issues for life. I was on the pill for 15 years, which is still considered a ‘treatment’. It is not. The same year I came off it (2010) I was at the GP with SEVERE bowel pain during my period (It was fused to my womb). The pill masked the symptoms, but it was quietly progressing. Please ban the use or presentation of the pill as ‘treatment’. ‘

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Gentleman on securing this incredibly important debate. One in five women will suffer from this disease, and it has been shown that, as that story shows, it can take up to seven years to convince a doctor. That is completely unacceptable. We have an issue in this country with what has been called the gender pain gap. We need to put more money into research and funding to look at proper cures and support for women when they need it most.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am most grateful to the hon. Lady, who speaks with a great deal of personal experience. We have been friends for a long time—since we came to this place. We are two West Yorkshire MPs, despite being on different sides of the aisle. I am grateful to her for making those points. As I said, it is important that the Department for Education and the Department of Health and Social Care take this forward. Other Members may wish to try to secure debates that are responded to by those Departments. I know that my hon. Friend the Minister will certainly feed those issues in.

I apologise for citing a lot of stories, Mr Pritchard, but it is important to set out the context. Another lady said:

“I had stage 4 (severe) endometriosis. I had a 7 year wait for diagnosis. From my referral to the hospital, I had a year and a half wait for surgery. My surgery was lifesaving as my bowel was 50% blocked with a mass of adhesions that had grown through the bowel. I was in constant pain, slept for 3 or 4 hours a day and was unable to care for my son properly. I considered putting him into care. If it wasn’t for him, I would have given up on everything. Despite being told in 2010 I ‘probably had endometriosis’ I was still given painkillers and mefenamic acid for years to manage the pain and symptoms. Throughout this time the endo was worsening, it is progressive. Had I been diagnosed earlier I may not have needed the bowel resection I needed and will have bowel issues for life. I was on the pill for 15 years, which is still considered a ‘treatment’. It is not. The same year I came off it (2010) I was at the GP with SEVERE bowel pain during my period (It was fused to my womb). The pill masked the symptoms, but it was quietly progressing. Please ban the use or presentation of the pill as ‘treatment’.”

Another woman said:

“I was diagnosed with endometriosis in May 2016. I would say 2 years was spent actively pursuing a diagnosis. But the previous 9 years I often went to the doctors, complained of pain and heavy flow and I was told ‘it’s just a bad period, it’s normal’. The hardest part of endometriosis for me would be the mental health side of things, coming to terms with the fact my body has limits and my life probably isn’t going to take the direction I thought it would.”
Someone else said:

“I was 17 when I was diagnosed with endometriosis. I’ve had 6 surgeries since. The thing I hate most about endometriosis is not being able to plan ahead because you don’t know how your pain is going to be that day. You could be absolutely fine, or you could be crippled.”

A young woman said:

“I was diagnosed with endometriosis on the 14 February last year, I was only 15. It took me 3 years to get diagnosed. For those 3 years, I was told I had unexplainable abdominal pain.”

Another story comes from a woman who said:

“I was diagnosed when I was 25 when I had a miscarriage. I had been struggling since I was a teenager with all the common signs of endometriosis. It just wasn’t picked up until I had my first surgery. What I hate most about endometriosis is that it takes time away from my children. Especially when I have to just go and rest in bed. I would love to be able to make it more aware for children, especially young girls and in schools, to be able to support them through this and see the early signs and educate GPs on the signs and symptoms.”

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for giving way and congratulate him on securing this hugely important debate. Does he agree that local groups, such as Endo Warriors in my constituency, which do such important work to educate young people in schools and to ensure that early signs of endometriosis can be picked up by doctors and health professionals, are absolutely vital and have such an important place in our communities and constituencies?

Alec Shelbrooke: I am grateful to the hon. Lady, who raises a very important point; there are many support groups out there. I will come to the workplace impact, for which the Minister is responsible, but one of the things that I want this debate to achieve is to highlight to women far and wide that there are lots of support groups in different areas of the country. More importantly, I hope that the debate will be heard by the Department for Education. To strengthen our point, we may have to come back to debate the issue with each separate Department, and we should ensure that we do so.

Another sufferer said to me:

“I have suffered with endometriosis since being 19. I had always had heavy periods and then my symptoms escalated to constant bleeding, pain on intercourse, really bad pain in the lower tummy and lower back. I was backwards and forwards from anywhere between 6 months plus, who constantly checked me for STDs. They’d do swabs, send me on my way and they’d come back clear, and I was in that cycle. I was in work one day when I was given an awareness form for endometriosis. Every symptom listed, I ticked. I’m now 36 and I’ve had 22 laparoscopies. Finally, I was offered a laparoscopy in February 2019 which was the diagnostic surgery I had been waiting for. The specialist surgeon found years of missed endometriosis due to untrained surgeons. Unfortunately, a shortage of worldwide endometriosis specialists means this is not uncommon for women suffering.

This disease has had a huge impact on my mental health. Alongside other personal family issues, the daily pain I have been going through has made tackling day to day life harder. Whilst I have had friends and family support me, I have also lost friends because they don’t understand this disease. I have tried to take my life multiple times because of it. The problems have also extended to my fertility. I have had miscarriages and a medically advised abortion. Not only was this a devastating and horrific experience for me but had a dramatic impact on my work life as well as personal.”

Another lady said to me:

“As soon as my periods started when I was just 12 years old, the problems began. I suffered extreme pain and heavy bleeding, to the point where I passed out several times. On speaking to my GP, I was told ‘every girl has this, it’s normal’. The doctor prescribed me oral morphine for the pain, but most of the time it didn’t help. Finally, I was offered a laparoscopy in February 2015. The surgeon told me I had endometriosis, but that they had treated it and I wouldn’t have any further surgeries. I was so happy and relieved, little did I know the fight was far from over. By October the symptoms had returned. On speaking to my doctor, I was told it couldn’t have come back after surgery, it was part of being a woman and I simply needed to be more positive. Eventually, I got referred to an endometriosis specialist hospital where an MRI scan showed my left ovary and bowel were stuck to my cervix and I had 100% got endometriosis back. This means more surgery.”

I am so grateful to the members of the public who engaged with the digital engagement platform. A woman from Newcastle shared her workplace experience. She said:

“I have been disciplined for being off sick. I am terrified to go off sick again, so I have to force myself to work even when the pain makes me vomit. If I go off sick again, I know they will sack me, this has been made very clear. I work for HMRC and I know this is a massive issue for other members of staff as well.”

Another lady said:

“I have been fired from all my jobs, my last workplace bullied me and mocked my illness, nothing was done via HR and I was made to leave instead. I have never had support from any workplace.”

Gill Furniss (Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough) (Lab): I thank the right hon. Gentleman for securing this extremely important debate. As a member of the all-party parliamentary group on endometriosis, which is ably chaired by the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), I have been privy to many of these stories. Does the right hon. Gentleman agree that a major barrier to support in the workplace is the taboo around menstrual health? Surely, we have to get people talking about that. One idea may be to encourage employers to become endometriosis-friendly, so that people get support and HR departments understand that it is a real illness and not something that someone should have to endure.

Alec Shelbrooke: I am grateful to the hon. Lady for that important point. That goes back to the earlier example of the lady who suffered for so many years and who got a diagnosis only when she had ticked every single box of a workplace survey. That is why we need a debate with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy—we need to work across so many areas of Government. The hon. Lady is right: any issue of women’s health, but especially menstrual health, is still taboo. Someone asked me why I secured this debate.
The primary reason is that I have worked very closely on this with a previous constituent of mine, but I also think it important that a man stands here and says that women’s health is not a taboo subject. We are all human beings and we all have health issues. We should all stick together and help everybody, regardless of how embarrassing we might find the subject. There is nothing embarrassing about health and we need to look after people.

The stories that I have given all share the same underlying theme: “I was told by doctors that it was all part of being a woman.” Given the backdrop of the personal trauma that women with endometriosis suffer—years without a diagnosis, personal relationships breaking down and strain on personal finances—they should at least be able to expect the law to protect them in the workplace, like anyone else who suffers with a disability. The truth, however, is that a whole host of employers are completely unsympathetic to the disease, and often dismiss employees because of a “poor sick record”.

Dr Dan Poulter (Central Suffolk and North Ipswich) (Con): My right hon. Friend makes a very good case and highlights the challenges faced by many women with endometriosis. He will recognise that many people have other chronic health conditions, such as inflammatory bowel disease, Crohn’s disease, ulcerative colitis or rheumatoid arthritis, which can also be life-limiting in the ways that he has outlined. For clarity, is he saying that endometriosis is a special case, or do the principles that he is outlining actually apply to many other chronic health conditions, the sufferers of which often find that they are also discriminated against at work?

Alec Shelbrooke: Of course, all employers should support people in the workplace who have any of the whole host of chronic illnesses that my hon. Friend mentioned, but quite a few of those illnesses get diagnosed relatively easily, or in a shorter time than endometriosis. One of the problems is that there is such a long diagnosis time—I will refer to that later. The hon. Member for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss) made a point about better education in the workplace. I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend the Member for Central Suffolk and North Ipswich (Dr Poulter) that this is not about singling out one disease—the whole range of workplace diseases must be covered—but it creates many issues when women cannot even get diagnosed, and cannot tell an employer, “This is what is going on.”

I was given a copy of this text message, which a lady received:

“Hey Karen,
I hope you are doing a bit better, I am sorry to hear you have so much going on physically.
We have had to pause your email access due to confidentiality as you are signed off sick. I am aware you may be off for a few months, so we will end your contact at this point as you are off for a prolonged period of time.
Should you wish to reapply when things work out for you please get in touch through the usual route.
I hope this all makes sense for you, and you can take the time you need to recover and get things back to normal.
Many thanks for all your input, and maybe hear from you again in the future.”

That last sentence perfectly encapsulates an utter lack of understanding and support that is far too commonplace.

I quote from an email I received this morning from the Open University, highlighting the work of PhD student Victoria Williams. She has given the following statistics, based on her doctoral research on the workplace:

In a study of 7,000 women across 52 countries, over 40% had given up or lost their job because of endometriosis... Others are being pushed into part-time roles or becoming self-employed whether the motivation or support is present or not... Women lose an average of 10.8 hours per week due to pain... Women lose an average of £5,757.72 per year due to lost work days... Many suffer in silence in the workplace in a bid to protect their jobs, careers, credibility and reputation. Women live with the daily predicament of disclosing symptoms which may drive accommodations or negatively fuel workplace discrimination... Endometriosis is a condition that is closely connected to menstruation alongside a history of shame, secrecy and lack of knowledge, it is classed as a taboo topic that constrains requesting and/or receiving organisational accommodations and support. Currently there is no advice for working with endometriosis from government bodies, occupational health specialists or the CIPD.

One woman told me,

“I have had to have extended probations, sickness meetings, ‘what are you going to do to make this better’ and you have to sit there knowing you can’t do anything as there’s no cure.”

Going back to the lady in my previous story, when she had to have the medically advised abortion, a manager said, “Should’ve worn a condom.” The lady said it was hard to describe how disgusted she was, as the manager knew what she was going through.

A catalogue of women starting jobs only to fail the probation period due to sick leave is, I am afraid, an all too common reality. However, it would be remiss of me not to name an employer that women have told me has tried very hard to help sufferers. NPw would allow one severe sufferer to work from home, on flexible working, and was understanding of hospital appointments and surgeries. Let me take this opportunity to highlight an employer that shows that it is not impossible to support women in the workplace with this terrible disease.

My ambition for today’s debate is to raise awareness, especially of support groups, such as the one that the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell) mentioned, and others such as the Northern Endometriosis Sisters Support and Period Powerful Hub, to mention just two. I want better education in schools for young girls, as we can easily overlook the problem that a young woman with a single-parent father may have in understanding these issues. As I said, I hope that this debate will be recognised by several Departments, but I ask the Minister to ask the Department for Work and Pensions to do a full assessment of how the Department recognises endometriosis as a disability.

For too long, women with this disease have been dismissed as lazy, unreliable, dishonest and a nuisance. It surely must be illegal for a manager who is told of a sufferer’s condition to dismiss it out of hand by saying, “Should’ve worn a condom.” Women have described having to cope with blood seepage through their clothes, but another common factor can be a complete loss of bowel control, and having to dash to the bathroom unexpectedly. To have such an embarrassing and distressing situation used against them, and sometimes to be mocked in the workplace, must surely be illegal. The Equality Act 2010 is a piece of legislation we should all be proud of, but as with all law, it should evolve and change, especially when previously unreconciled situations come to the fore.
I want an assurance from the Minister that he will instruct his Department to do an assessment of how the blatant breaches of law on workplace humiliation, employment protection and, quite frankly, workplace bullying can be addressed, since this silent disease, which often has no physical appearance, can be so easily ignored by employers.

Dr Poulter: One of the challenges that the Minister will face when responding to the debate is that while there are medical guidelines from the Royal College of Obstetricians and Gynaecologists, and I think there are some National Institute for Health and Care Excellence guidelines on how to diagnose and support women with endometriosis, those guidelines are not particularly well known among all the medical community. I wonder whether more should be done by the Department of Health and Social Care to improve diagnostic rates. If more women had a confirmed diagnosis, it would strengthen this Minister’s hand in taking action in the workplace.

Alec Shelbrooke: I was just about to say that I need the Minister to work with the Department of Health and Social Care, because without a proper medical sign-off, this situation will keep arising, and by the time a diagnosis is finally made, many women have already seen their life destroyed. The Minister will have heard my hon. Friend’s intervention.

I close with some rhetorical questions. Why is a disease that affects 1.5 million women in this country so unrecognised, and so easily dismissed? Why is there not women’s health education in schools, to help young women through their life journey and illnesses they may be suffering from? Why do we have such poor medical diagnosis? How have we been able to go so long without in-depth training for gynaecological surgeons who can help tackle this disease? Fundamentally, and pertinent to this debate, why, despite decades of work on the protection of employee rights in the workplace, do employers try to not only ignore this disease, but shuffle sufferers out of the door?

More than 1.5 million women in this country have been desperately crying out for far too long. Let today be the day that we stop failing so many women in our society.

Several hon. Members rose—

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Order. Due to the interest in this debate, I am afraid I must impose a three-minute time limit on speeches. I call Ivan Lewis.

2.58 pm

Mr Ivan Lewis (Bury South) (Ind): It is always a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) not only on securing the debate, but on the eloquent way that he presented his arguments, which were excellent and enabled us all to unite around them.

I will speak briefly on behalf of a constituent who wants to be identified, Katie Adwas, who came to see me only last week. She is a teacher, and actually she has a supportive employer. She explained to me what it is like to live with constant pain every second of every minute of every hour of every day, and how exhausting it is to do her job and get through the day. Unless we experience that, it is very difficult to relate to and understand. It makes everything she does in her life so much more difficult.

Although she recognises the need to focus on the world of work, she feels very strongly about the need for a focus on earlier diagnosis, better treatment and funding for research, which the right hon. Gentleman mentioned. It took 10 years—an entire decade—for my constituent to be diagnosed with endometriosis, by which time she was already at stage 4. She initially went to see her GP regarding a problem connected with endometriosis. As a consequence of that, at the age of 16, she was not only prescribed antidepressants but told that, as a woman, she would have to live with that kind of thing. The right hon. Gentleman alluded to that. At primary healthcare level, GP training is crucial; if that does not happen, we are destined to continue to have many problems.

Katie has also had a number of operations specifically to try to save her fertility. She wants to start a family, but she made the point that, unfortunately, surgery is not always successful. It can lead to the removal of appendix and ovaries, which, along with the condition more generally, can have a horrendous impact on someone’s mental health. We need to be concerned not just about the physical consequences of this condition, but about the long-term and ongoing mental health problems that, for understandable reasons, many women experience.

Katie very much wanted me to be her voice today. Other women in my constituency have been in touch too. I think we heard that one in five or one in 10 women across the country suffer from this condition. That is an extraordinary statistic. As policy makers and legislators, we must recognise that we have failed to act to date, and that we now have an opportunity and a responsibility to take decisive action. It is incredibly important that there is a joined-up approach across Departments. As the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell said, it is clear that there are a number of Departments with responsibility that can make a difference on these issues.

It is also incredibly important that the Department of Health and Social Care does not say, as it often does, “We are not willing to focus on specific conditions; we are willing to have generic approaches to groups of conditions, but we are not willing to train people on, raise awareness of or recognise particular conditions, which need a much greater level of central intervention. It is obvious from the neglect that this condition has experienced for a long time that it needs central intervention. Centrally driven changes in policy are essential. Of course, delivery has to come on the ground—that is about awareness raising, training, early intervention and education—but we also need a specific focus on this condition.

3.2 pm

Jackie Doyle-Price (Thurrock) (Con): I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) on the sensitive way in which he introduced the debate. He posed three questions at the end of his speech. The answer to all three is: “Because it affects women.”
I have never been one to claim that we are disadvantaged as women, but I have seen over time that so much discrimination still happens. Never was that clearer than when I served as a Health Minister. Over and over again, I was approached by female colleagues from across the House—we are all very good at fighting for ourselves—who told me about how they had felt diminished at the hands of the NHS when sharing their experiences of quite common conditions.

At the heart of this debate is the fact that 51% of us have periods, so there should be far better understanding of menstrual health and what constitutes a healthy period. I pay tribute to the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) for her work in this area. She highlighted to me the under-diagnosis of endometriosis, despite the fact that, as we have heard, it can be a debilitating condition for some women and it is very common.

I had the pleasure of addressing the hon. Lady’s women’s health conference, where I met representatives from Endometriosis UK. They had three jars, which contained physical representations of how many sanitary products someone would use if they had a healthy period, if they had heavy periods or if they had dysmenorrhea, which affects people with endometriosis. That was a revelation. If only young women were shown that when they started their periods, they could manage their menstrual health so much more effectively. I met a woman from Endometriosis UK who was in her early 20s. She had struggled with endometriosis and very heavy periods throughout her teens, to the extent that she had had to have time off school. Seeing that representation had been a revelation for her; she had been able to get the treatment she needed and carry on with life.

That brings me to my final point, which I pitch to the Minister for him to consider when he responds to the debate. We all expect our employers to have good policies on staff wellbeing—we encourage that with respect to mental health and physical health—but we really should encourage them to do much more about really common conditions that can be managed effectively with support. I thank everybody for attending the debate—especially the men.

3.5 pm

Louise Haigh (Sheffield, Heeley) (Lab): Last year, during a round of crucial Brexit votes, I collapsed in the Opposition Whips Office and was taken to A&E over the road. I ended up staying in St Thomas’s for almost a week. I was back in A&E with the same problem, in excruciating pain. Last week, during a similar round of crucial Brexit votes, I collapsed in the road. I ended up staying in St Thomas’ s for almost a week.

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3.8 pm

Sir David Amess (Southend West) (Con): That was a brave speech by the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh). I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) for securing it. I am so grateful to women such as Emma Barnett for using their platform to highlight the consequences for women of our failure to address their health, and for risking all the opprobrium they receive for speaking out. I hope that together we can move this agenda forward, and demonstrate to millions of women that their voices are heard and that we will no longer allow them to suffer in silence.

Since the BBC covered this subject on 7 October, many of our constituents have raised issues with us. I will not repeat them all; I will just pay tribute to Carla Cressy, a local constituent who came to see me at a surgery, described her condition and encouraged me to set up the all-party parliamentary group on endometriosis. We have with us the hon. Members for Sheffield, Brightside and Hillsborough (Gill Furniss), for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) and for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy), who are all very active members of that group. I thank them for their support.

When it comes to appreciating the severity of endometriosis, I was concerned to learn that the universal credit manual states that “endometriosis is rarely disabling”. I am sure that my hon. Friend the Minister will be keen to explain the progress that has already been made on this subject, and I kindly ask that that guidance is re-examined and corrected. If workplace support is to be suitable, we have to make sure that managers truly appreciate that the condition is not just a little inconvenience; it affects everyone’s lives and can often be disabling. If we truly want progress towards meaningful workplace
as if you were reading it naturally.
women in the west of Scotland to complement the services already provided in units in Aberdeen and Edinburgh. It was simply not fair that my constituents had to travel from North Ayrshire and Arran to Edinburgh for specialist care for this condition, and he has worked hard to secure that change. He has campaigned incessantly for better treatment and greater awareness of the issue, and he was the first to bring the issue of endometriosis to the Floor of the Scottish Parliament in a debate in 2001, and again last year. He is the only Member of the Scottish Parliament to have secured debates on the issue in its 20-year history.

This debate is timely as we seek to address support in the workplace for this condition. Otherwise women find that their contribution to and potential in the workplace and wider economy is lost. Women often lose out on sick pay for the recurring nature of the condition, so that needs to be addressed. It has a huge impact on women's lives in the world of work as they might require time out for medical treatment and consultations. They suffer pain and fatigue, and the seven and a half years before diagnosis makes it very hard for employers to treat their condition with the seriousness it deserves. We have to keep talking about it. We must keep shining a light on it and raise awareness and understanding. That in itself will do much to ease the burden of women with the condition.

3.18 pm

Justin Madders (Ellesmere Port and Neston) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) on securing the debate and on the excellent way in which he introduced it. As many Members know, I have spoken in the past about the challenges that my wife faces as a fibromyalgia sufferer, and I can see many parallels between the two conditions, given the debilitating physical symptoms and their unpredictability, as well as the lack of understanding from the public and employers about the conditions and the delays in getting a diagnosis.

I want to speak briefly about the experience of a person I spoke to who suffers from endometriosis. She told me that before she was diagnosed she had regular periods of extreme pain, which she described as more severe than giving birth. She said the contraction-like pains would last for several days a month, which made it difficult for her to look after her children and go to work, yet she did not feel that she could take time off for what her GP described as bad period pains. She went back and forth to her GP for three years and was given increasing amounts of pain medication. Outrageously, she was told that, as a woman in her 40s, she was not expected to have to put up with it for much longer. I simply cannot believe that was the advice. She was eventually diagnosed and had treatment, and she is now on the mend.

Endometriosis UK has called for those with the condition to have access to statutory sick pay. As it stands, the current definition of SSP penalises people with chronic long-term conditions such as endometriosis, whose symptoms can be experienced over many years. What about people who work in the gig economy? How realistic is it for people in agency work or on zero-hours contracts to take time off when they are suffering, knowing that they may not get a call back when the next shift becomes available? We need to think about wider protections.

We also need to make it easier for employers to feel comfortable in talking about endometriosis with their staff, who will hopefully feel more supported if they can have an open dialogue. An endometriosis-friendly employer scheme would be helpful in that respect and would effectively mean people could manage their conditions better in the workplace. Some of the examples given by the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell about how people have been treated in the workplace show that there is an awfully long way to go.

This is a good opportunity for the Government, and for Parliament, to lead by example and become endometriosis-friendly employers. I would be happy if we could support that scheme. We must step up the fight here to ensure that all women who suffer from that terrible condition have the support they need in the workplace. That means strengthening workplace protection so that women do not feel that they need to fight their employer as well as the condition itself.

3.21 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) on bringing this matter to the attention of the House. As the father of three sons, I must admit that the subject of periods and “women’s concerns”, as my mother used to call them, was not my forte. The hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paola Sherriff) will know what I am about to say, as I have told her before—and I commend her for all that she does and for the event that she held in Portcullis House. It was helpful for everyone to be aware of the issues.

In my office five out of six staff members are female, and two of those girls suffer from endometriosis. I have overheard too many conversations to ignore the issue and leave it in a pile marked as women’s concerns. I married my wife some 32 years ago, and at the time she suffered from endometriosis as well. The doctor told her, “If you have some children, that will clear it up.” Well, we had three children, and it did not clear it up—that is a fact.

I did a little research, with the help of the House of Commons Library, and the briefing states:

“It is not known how many women are affected by endometriosis in the UK, there are no official figures collected on prevalence but a figure commonly cited is that it is estimated to affect 1 in 10 women. In 2015, the Royal College of Nursing reported that the exact prevalence of endometriosis is unknown but estimates range from between two and 10 per cent of the general female population but up to 50 percent in infertile women.” The NHS does collect data on hospital admissions where endometriosis was the primary condition—in 2018-19 there were 23,000 hospital admissions where the main cause was endometriosis in England.”

I will always bring in the perspective of Northern Ireland, where nearly all the 380 women who took part in BBC research said endometriosis had badly affected their mental health, career opportunities, sexual relationships and education. The latest figures show that in Northern Ireland the number of women waiting for a gynaecology out-patient appointment rose from 7,700 in 2012 to 17,000 in March. That is a massive increase of about 120%. In 2010, 221 patients were waiting for a laparoscopy, and by March this year the
number had almost tripled to 606. That shows that the issue is becoming more prevalent. Of those waiting, nearly half have been doing so for more than six months. Those women are being failed by the NHS. Yet we expect them to continue to go to work with immense pain, feeling ill and sometimes unable to move. Worse, we live in a society where we have been trained not to talk about it. We talk about migraines openly in the workplace, but the debilitating disease of endometriosis is just as deserving of consideration and support in the workplace.

I firmly believe that we must begin a campaign to raise awareness of the problem for women, and of how gentle support can and must be put in place. That support can range from more frequent rest breaks to a change of activity during flare-ups in manual labour jobs, and even flexibility in sick day procedure. It is just a matter of understanding, being compassionate and sincere and trying to help—having empathy. I believe the change must start from here and work its way through all public sector jobs. I look to the Minister, as always, to understand how and when he intends to implement that support system.

3.24 pm

Paula Sherriff (Dewsbury) (Lab): Thank you for accommodating me in the debate, Mr Pritchard. I had not intended to make a speech but was inspired by my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh), who spoke of her own experiences.

Many Members may know that one of the main issues that I have championed since coming to this place in 2015, besides constituency issues, has been women’s health. Largely that has been the result of my own experiences. I have an endometrial disease and, thankfully, I was lucky with respect to workplace issues. I worked in the NHS through most of the time in question, including diagnosis, so my employers were reasonably understanding when I went through chemical menopause at the age of 36 or 37. I want to stress how important it is for women to seek help at an early age if they experience abnormalities or, as in my case, very heavy and painful periods.

The thing that really encouraged me to seek help was when I went to Asda after work one day and fainted from the pain. I have never experienced childbirth, so I cannot compare it, but it was the most chronic abdominal pain. I worked in a hospital at the time. I will not use the words that I said to the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess), for fear that they might be unparliamentary. I chose not to see the gynaecologist in the hospital where I worked because I thought, “If he has been looking at my nether regions I don’t particularly want to bump into him in the hospital canteen,” so I got a diagnosis at another hospital in the neighbouring trust in south Yorkshire. The gynaecologist was a mature gentleman and was very rude, saying to me, “Put up with it; you’re a woman, and women have periods.” I found that absolutely devastating and, like my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley, I went home and cried. I thought, “I have to put up with this. This can’t be right.”

Years later I got a diagnosis—at the hospital where I worked, ironically. That gynaecologist has since emigrated to New Zealand, although I am assured that it was nothing to do with me. Within minutes of meeting me he said, “I know exactly what’s wrong.” I had already had three lots of surgery—two laparoscopies and one hysteroscopy. He allowed me to have the chemical menopause or a hysterectomy. I chose the chemical menopause because I still harboured hopes of having children. Thankfully, I was one of the women virtually cured by it. It brought some other health challenges. There is a message in that, about empowering women to ask for a second opinion. There is nothing wrong with doing that.

Traditionally in this country—thankfully, things are changing gradually—legislation has been made by men. If I have a headache or break my leg, men can empathise, because they have heads and legs too. But if I have a problem with my periods or my womb, we are still playing catch-up. I feel that the tide is turning. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke), whose speech was excellent.

3.27 pm

Mr Khalid Mahmood (Birmingham, Perry Barr) (Lab): I appreciate that I am late in coming to the debate, Mr Pritchard, but it is an important issue, and I thank the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) for obtaining it. The issue is not recognised by most people. In particular, women end up taking a huge amount of painkillers—not just during their periods but when the pain is excruciating and they are unable to move or do anything. That has a huge effect on their kidneys. I have had a kidney transplant, and I understand that. People say, “Just take some more painkillers,” but that is not the way to solve it. We must look at how employers deal with it, and how the NHS deals with it. That is the most important thing, and I wanted to make that point because I have a friend who is a sufferer.

3.28 pm

Hannah Bardell (Livingston) (SNP): I congratulate the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) on securing the debate. I put a shout out on social media yesterday and was overwhelmed by the responses I got from women across my constituency and beyond. When I posted something about the debate, asking people to watch it, a post came in from a woman who said, “It nearly killed me.” That goes to the heart of the issue and conveys the severity of endometriosis symptoms.

A statistic that I was not aware of, which came up early in the right hon. Gentleman’s speech, is the 62% increase in the rate of heart attacks among those who suffer from endometriosis. One of my staff members had a hysterectomy because of endometriosis, and she suffers from a number of other health issues, which we have done our very best to accommodate and support her through. I have seen the pain that she went through. A number of my friends suffer in this way; one of them, Sabrina, got in touch with me. I remember working with her in Aberdeen, and recall the pain and suffering that she went through—and, sadly, the lack of support that she often received from employers, was significant.

The right hon. Gentleman mentioned an anonymous person who had got in touch with him and who worked at HMRC. Another woman from HMRC—she does
not want to be named—got in touch with me, and said that she feels unable to miss work appointments, and that the condition has had a deep emotional impact and caused her huge anxiety. She said:

“I work in a male dominated civil service department and have had my concerns ignored, and a previous manager even refused to document the condition as it made him feel uncomfortable.”

The fact that so many men are speaking up about this issue today—the husband of my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) has also raised it in the Scottish Parliament a number of times—goes to show that there are men out there who care. We must ensure that every employer does, and we can make a significant dent in that by getting the UK Government to commit to ensuring that HMRC, and all other Departments, are sensitive and prepared for something that is clearly an issue in their own house.

This has been a hugely consensual debate. I do not want to be overly critical, but we cannot have consensus just in Westminster Hall today and nowhere else. We can do something about this issue if we work together. We heard what the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff) has had to endure, and the hon. Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) spoke powerfully about her experiences and the work she has done. There is huge expertise in this room, but I also wish to give a voice to some of the women who have got in touch with me. One said:

“I was lucky to have a good employer and eventually they sent me home with the promise that I go to the doctor, as the pain was so bad one day.”

She said that her doctor had no clue what the problem was, and she had to go to hospital many times after suffering for 10 years. Another women, Ailsa, said that the condition “completely impacted my work and social life due to the pain, anxiety and isolation”.

Rebecca said that endometriosis had a life-changing impact on her mental health. She has been trying to reduce her working hours, but that has not yet been implemented, and she has been off sick since August.

A number of women got in touch to say that their employers have been sensitive to this issue, but so many are not. Raising awareness of endometriosis is our duty, but doing something about it is even more of a duty. One woman said that she was constantly being called to her desk. We are all employers, and it is our duty to support our staff.

Another constituent, Rachel, said that she lobbied her employer, and they now have an understanding. She has been able to get better support, whereas previously she lost pay or had to take holidays to attend operations or hospital appointments. She was unable to get sick pay, which added to her stress and financial worry, and those poor experiences resulted in her taking more time off. One woman told me that she is fighting her employer to get reduced working hours, just so she can work at a desk. We are all employers, and it is our duty to support our staff.

Emma got in touch with me to say:

“25 years blessed with a curse...finally diagnosed 15 years ago after 10 years of being palp off.”

She was told that she suffered from hypochondria—that old chestnut—and that periods were “meant to be painful”, that was said by a man. Someone said, “I’m sure your pain is very real to you,” as she crawled to A&E, crying her eyes out and vomiting in pain. She was told that periods cannot cause leg pain—she uses crutches some of the time—and she often passes out from pain when going to the toilet. She was told, however, that she looked “fine”. She wrote:

“Through the years I’ve passed out so much that my bathroom floor has had more hits than Take That”.

That goes to the heart of the issue.

Shirley said that she “worked full time and had NO support from bosses and management...even after my specialist wrote to them I still got no support...in fact they stressed me out that much I had a heart attack”.

Such experiences are outrageous, and wherever we find them, we must call them out. Not every woman can get in touch with her employer, or ask a specialist to write a letter. We must do everything we can as Members of Parliament and legislators to change the narrative, change the law if necessary, and work holistically across Departments and the UK to ensure that women who suffer from endometriosis get a proper diagnosis at the proper time and the right support. When women are at work, they should not be persecuted for something over which they have no control.

3.36 pm

Mike Amesbury (Weaver Vale) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Elmet and Rothwell (Alec Shelbrooke) on securing this important debate.

We have heard excellent and powerful contributions from 15 hon. Members about the profound impact that this complex and debilitating condition can have on our constituents—and on Members of the House, including my hon. Friend the Member for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh). It is extraordinary to think that nearly as many women in the UK have endometriosis as have diabetes, yet the suffering associated with it is often private and unseen. Part of the issue is a still-ingrained culture of silence and even shame when it comes to women’s reproductive health, and the pervasive attitude that serious menstrual pain is normal and natural. It is not.

When such attitudes collide with working life, the effects on women can be profound. For the 30% of women with the disease who have severe endometriosis, the condition can stop them working in the way they want.
As we heard from hon. Members across the House, some women report finding conventional, full-time jobs impossible to hold down because of the impact of the condition on the hours they can work—zero-hours contracts have been mentioned—and the tasks they can perform. In some cases, women are literally managed out of work. Recent research shows that such actions can lead to those women who are most severely affected losing on average more than £5,000 in earnings a year, and one in six women gives up work entirely. We cannot afford to ignore this condition any longer.

Workplace attitudes often do not help. Today, we have listened to the experiences of women, and we heard the same stories over and over: when it comes to endometriosis, women are often not believed or supported by doctors, employers or even loved ones. Almost all women who responded to a recent BBC survey on endometriosis felt that their career had been hampered. The knock-on effects of endometriosis on mental health are shocking; almost half of the women surveyed reported that they had experienced suicidal thoughts.

Endometriosis UK provides information and guidance for employers and employees, but workplace guidance from the Government is still lacking. Endometriosis is not mentioned in several mainstream Government resources on occupational health and disability. Government acknowledgement is a vital part of awareness and recognition of endometriosis; in the absence of that acknowledgment, the condition is often framed as a performance issue, rather than a health concern. Will the Minister commit to changing this discriminatory practice? As the hon. Member for Southend West (Sir David Amess) highlighted, some of that has to do with the DWP.

Another problem raised by Endometriosis UK is statutory sick pay. The current guidance limits statutory sick pay to three years—much less than half of the average time it takes a woman suffering from endometriosis to be diagnosed, let alone their total time living with the condition. Endometriosis is a chronic, complex and fluctuating condition. Will the Minister do everything he can to ensure that statutory sick pay reflects reality?

Concerns have also been raised by the Work Foundation about how guidance for benefits such as the personal independence payment covers endometriosis. It has been highlighted that this issue cuts across many Departments. I represent the Department for Work and Pensions, but there is clearly a big role for the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy in how employers are acting, for the Department of Health and Social Care on awareness and how long it takes to get the correct diagnosis, and for the Department for Education in raising awareness at a younger age, although it does seem that there are positive steps. To ensure that nothing falls between the cracks, my Department recently moved the Office for Disability Issues to the Cabinet Office. We are still responsible, but it is based in the Cabinet Office so that on cross-cutting issues such as this it can be the eyes and ears, making sure that there is joined-up approach.

I absolutely give a full commitment, on behalf of the DWP, that we will engage fully with the APPG review, to identify areas where we can improve awareness with our frontline staff, and improve how we handle benefits, support and everything that we can possibly do. We will also do everything we can to encourage the other three Departments, which I have no doubt will be just as willing to be proactive in this area. With the APPG’s helpful, constructive, proactive review, using the wealth of experience that is out there, hopefully together we can make a big difference.

Jim Shannon: We clearly welcome what the Minister just said, but as the shadow Minister said, surely there needs to be an understanding in the DWP of what endometriosis is and what its symptoms are, so that is reflected when considering someone’s benefits. As elected representatives, we sometimes find that that is not the case. How will the Minister ensure that the Department and officials can make that change?

Justin Tomlinson: That is what I am articulating. We want to know that all our frontline staff and systems are taking that on. People are raising concerns that may not necessarily be directly linked to the DWP, although they may be. That is why I want to commit as much as I can to support the review, because if there are areas in which we can improve, we should and will improve in them. There is a genuine commitment.
Louise Haigh: The point about taboos has been raised by many people, and the fact that this condition is so under-researched and given so little airtime because it relates specifically and only to women, I bring the Minister’s attention to the #periodpositive pledge, developed by my constituent Chella Quint, which campaigns against menstrual taboos and asks particularly for all official documentation to explicitly use the terms “menstrual issues” or “menstrual health issues” rather than euphemisms such as feminine and sanitary hygiene.

Justin Tomlinson: That is a really helpful suggestion, which we will make sure is fed in.

Patricia Gibson: I welcome what the Minister said about the DWP looking at how it can raise awareness of the condition for frontline staff. Does he agree that it is important to look at how sick pay works? Given the recurrent nature of the condition, it often has a financial cost to women in days lost to sickness. Will he commit to looking at whether endometriosis can be accommodated?

Justin Tomlinson: I will come to that in my speech, so I ask hon. Members to be a little patient. I will cover most of the points raised.

When, of the four Departments, my Department and I were selected to respond to the debate—one of four Ministers could have been selected to respond—I had my initial reaction was: do I know much about this? I was contacted by a former employee, Kamya Gopal—she is happy for me to name her—who had this condition. When I employed her, we had had a conversation and made some relatively easy changes that involved being sympathetic: she had to go for short-notice GP appointments; we took into account a need for urgent toilet breaks when doing visits, making sure we were not too far away; and we took things on a day-to-day basis. For a reasonable length of time, no changes were needed. Sometimes they were, and we just accepted that, and it worked. The key thing is that it was easy for me to make those changes, and I as an employer benefited, for four years, from a really valuable member of my team. It was a win-win from having the confidence to have that conversation. She made it clear to me—this has come across clearly in hon. Members’ speeches—that it affects everyone differently. For her, it is a family trait, but they all have different symptoms and challenges to overcome. It all comes down to having that conversation.

Linked to that, another impact is the need to use disabled toilets. Kamya has a RADAR key—it is a hidden disability—and recently someone challenged her for using the disabled toilet. She had to explain, which was embarrassing for her and for the lady who challenged her. That is why I pay tribute to the hon. Member for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), who has been championing Grace’s sign, which is fully supported by my Department, to raise awareness of hidden disabilities and hidden health conditions and avoid those confrontational, embarrassing situations.

It is important that people with health conditions get the support that enables them to stay in work, and productive in work. Such support is wide-ranging and relies on employers being open to discussing health matters with their employees in a respectful and constructive way.

I am on my fifth Secretary of State as a Minister in the DWP, and I have many roundtables with different stakeholders. We were talking about disability employment yesterday, and it was interesting how there has been a shift in focus to ensuring that people do not drop out of work due to disability or a health condition. Collectively we must do much more in that area. I am encouraged that there is increasing awareness and recognition of hidden disabilities, and hidden health conditions in particular. There is still a huge way to go, but there is a willingness in society to do better.

Endometriosis is a serious condition; we have heard about the ways that it can be debilitating. For the estimated one in 10 women in the UK who suffer, the condition can have a huge effect on their daily lives, including their ability to work to their full ability. As the examples quoted by various Members today show, diagnosis is not always straightforward. Problems arise because symptoms can vary significantly, and because diagnosis tends to require invasive procedures. I do not profess to be a health expert, but it is clear that because endometriosis is seen as a taboo, that will impact on the ability to diagnose and provide support. Members have spoken powerfully about how we have to do much more in that area.

The challenging nature of the condition is recognised within the health system, which now has specialist training. NHS England has developed a service specification for severe endometriosis under the specialised commissioning area of complex gynaecology. That is a good step. It is the beginning of the journey and we will have to see what difference it makes, but I am encouraged that it is starting to happen.

Through these measures diagnosis and treatment should improve, but we must also consider the effect on the ability to work. A survey by investment firm Standard Life found that one in six women with endometriosis report having to give up work because of the severity of their symptoms, with almost all—some 87%—reporting that the condition affected their financial position in some way.

Individual women feel the harmful effects, but employers and the economy as a whole lose out. The leading charity, Endometriosis UK, has estimated that the total cost to the economy of the condition is £8.2 billion; the cost from loss of work is a key contributor to that figure. As outlined in the Work Foundation report, such an impact means that the days of dismissing topics such as these as “women’s issues” are long gone. We know that both the health and work landscapes must be more aware of the condition and its symptoms, for the sake of the women who suffer from it and in order to build a healthier and more productive society for all.

One way that people in work are protected is through the Equality Act 2010, which is the principal means through which disabled people are protected from discrimination in Great Britain. Other than for a very few exceptions, the Act recognises a disability by the impact on the person’s life rather than by the condition itself. Importantly, that means that women with endometriosis are protected by the Act if their condition has a substantial and long-term adverse effect on their ability to carry out normal day-to-day activities. I recognise the points that have been highlighted about how we need to improve the awareness and the enforcement of the Act, and about wider support. I will come on to some of the work in that area.
Individuals are also protected in law against unfair dismissal. While those legal protections exist, sufferers continue to face barriers to work and barriers in the workplace, as we have heard. More must be done to raise awareness of hidden conditions. Workplace cultures must adapt to spread understanding of the importance of supporting individuals with health conditions and the value of open discussions about health in the workplace.

Alec Shelbrooke: Can my hon. Friend pick up on the specific point that was raised about HMRC by myself and the hon. Member for Livingston (Hannah Bardell)? I absolutely agree with what he is saying, but it seems like an easy starting point to address that point with a Government Department.

Justin Tomlinson: Yes, absolutely. HMRC has been named and shamed in this debate; we will make sure it is made aware of that. I hope and expect that it will act to improve on that.

Hannah Bardell: Will the Minister guarantee that no employee of HMRC, or any other Government Department, who has spoken out or contacted their MP will be persecuted or disadvantaged in any way in their place of employment? Because of the treatment she had experienced at HMRC, the constituent who contacted me was concerned that she would be putting herself at further risk if she were to be named. That is why I have not named her. Can he give me that guarantee?

Justin Tomlinson: That is absolutely understood. It is underpinned by the Equality Act 2010, which protects workers in the workplace.

Unfortunately, as highlighted, there remains stigma and taboo attached to discussing health issues that affect women. I think my hon. Friend the Member for Thurrock (Jackie Doyle-Price) said that she was pleased to see so many men contributing or responding in this debate. I recognise that that is important. I also welcome the recent media focus on endometriosis, which has begun to break down some stigma and taboo. There is still a long way to go. This debate alone highlights the need to do more. Women, particularly young women, must know that they do not need to suffer in silence. This is one of the few issues that unites us across parties; those who have campaigned on this issue should take credit for helping to secure that cross-party support.

I find cause for optimism in parallels with work supporting other hidden disabilities, such as mental health issues, where we have been able to raise awareness. There has been a desire in all parts of society to improve what we can do. We need to replicate that with this condition in light of the concerns that have been raised.

The Government’s main role is to create conditions in which employers can do the right thing. In mid-July we published a consultation on proposals to reduce ill-health-related job loss, called “Health is everyone’s business”. The consultation closed on 7 October, but I will try to make sure that everything that has been raised today is fed into that. There were some helpful insights.

The proposals covered a range of areas, such as changes to the legal framework to encourage employers to intervene early during sickness absences and provide workplace modifications; the reform to statutory sick pay, which many Members have highlighted as an area of particular interest; and better provision of information and advice to employers on health issues in the workplace, which is important to me.

We often think about big businesses that have HR and personnel departments. As long as the key decision makers at the top can be convinced about what their organisation should be doing, there are professionals who are comfortable making sure that that is embedded in the culture of the organisation. As an example, I would like to make a tribute to John Lewis & Partners; I spoke at an event in Parliament last week about its provision of good in-work health support for its staff.

However, over 50% of private sector jobs are in small or medium-sized businesses. With the best will in the world, they do not have HR or personnel departments, so we must do far more to ensure that they have information and to signpost them to organisations and groups that can provide the next level of support. I want to see that delivered through the Health and Safety Commission. We are brilliant at supporting safety in the workplace; we have to have the same approach on health and on improvements to the quality and accessibility of occupational health services. These proposals do not name and target specific conditions, but they will reduce ill-health-related job loss across the board, which will benefit those suffering with endometriosis.

I again thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Elmet and Rothwell for highlighting the powerful words of many of the people who contacted him. I know that, with over 2,000 responses, he had a lot to choose from. One response that articulated the value of flexibility particularly well said:

“You don’t know how your pain is going to be that day. You could be absolutely fine, or you could be crippled.”

Being able to adjust workload on a given day, or to choose to work from home, will enable women who experience fluctuating symptoms like that to stay in work.

The Government are committed to showing employers the business case for this flexibility, and to showing that a more productive and engaged workforce, with better retention, will be the end result. I say that with genuine passion. I have employed many people with health conditions and disabilities, and I have benefited from that.

I have been grateful for the opportunity to address the issues raised. Endometriosis is a condition that we all need to take seriously, and those with the condition need all the support they can get. I trust I have been able to offer reassurances to hon. Members about the support and protection available, and about the measures that this Government are taking to support and encourage employers to support their employees with health conditions and create workplaces where everyone can thrive. We have much more to do. The all-party parliamentary group on endometriosis allows Members who have a real interest, passion and knowledge of this area to contribute. All Departments must take that seriously.

Finally, I pay tribute to all the volunteers who are providing support groups across the country, among our local communities. They are making a real difference, ensuring that people realise they are not suffering alone.
Alec Shelbrooke: I thank every single right hon. and hon. Member who has contributed today. Given the times we are going through, it goes to show the strength of parliamentarians from across parties that we have come together to deliver a clear message about where we want to get to as we move forward.

My main aim today was to raise the issue further into the public perspective. I welcome the Minister’s words; I know the APPG will be feeding into that. I am excited by the fact that the issue is now with the Cabinet Office, so that it can look at it across Departments. We have made it clear—all coming at the subject from different angles—that we need different Departments to get a handle on the issue if we are to sort it out.

I pay personal tribute to the hon. Members for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) and for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff). Many of us in this Chamber suffer from health issues, but not many of us are brave enough to stand up and say what they are. People who inspire other people make change possible. Being able to look at someone who is in the position of being a Member of Parliament and say, “That person has the same thing I am suffering from,” hopefully lets the word spread. Fundamentally, we have to break down the taboos. We have to educate better in the workplace and use the education system we have, but we have to break down the taboos. We have made a good start today.

Motion lapsed (Standing Order No. 10(6)).
[Tim Farron]

Over the next three weeks we will work together to try to provide a long-term solution to the proposed loss of the 552 and the 530 services. We are grateful to have managed to persuade Stagecoach to give us that stay of execution. As I said, in a large rural area with a dispersed population, it is hard for bus services to be run on a commercial basis and, unlike many urban areas, we cannot rely on the private sector to fill the gaps when funding disappears. In fact, none of the recent services that have been cut has since been taken up by a commercial provider. Once they are gone, they are usually gone for good.

That is why I am so determined that we should find solutions now to protect or to replace the 530 and the 552 before they disappear. With no alternative bus service, those communities can easily become cut off. The average age in my patch is 10 years above the national average, and with a significantly larger older population the need for reliable, regular bus services is all the greater. Many people I know have found themselves alone and disconnected in their later years, the loss of bus services leaving them stranded in places that are utterly beautiful but utterly isolated.

The steady erosion of our bus services comes at the worst time, when other key services are also being reduced. The closure of bank branches in places such as Milnthorpe, Grange, Sedbergh, Ambleside and Coniston in recent times, alongside the closure of shops and post offices, means that people rely even more on public transport to get to the bigger towns and villages, just as those public transport options are disappearing.

That is why we were right to fight to expose Barclays for its dreadful plan to withdraw from the scheme that underpins our post offices, and I am relieved that Barclays has done a U-turn under pressure from many of us. However, it is a reminder that we need to ensure that the banks pay a fair price to the post offices that now fill the spaces that they left behind when they closed their branches and abandoned our communities.

Many in our towns and villages rely on the buses for the basic tasks of daily life—shopping, doctor’s appointments, seeing friends and family or getting to work. The 530 is the only bus route that serves the village of Levens. It is well used by residents to travel into Kendal to shop and to access other vital services. The same applies to the 552; without that service, there is no regular bus connection linking Arnside with places such as Penrith and Kendal and Penrith, and of the 597 Windermere town bus. In Sedbergh the buses are now run by the community-run Western Dales Bus, set up after the cancellation of the 564 left Sedbergh entirely without a connection to the main town of Kendal. I am massively grateful to the volunteers who make those services possible. Indeed, it was a pleasure to be a volunteer driver myself on the Sedbergh bus just a few months ago. It was a great pleasure for the passengers too—at least, they were pleased when the experience was over.

I am proud of our communities and proud of the bus services that so many groups run locally, working tirelessly to provide the best services they can, but it is a battle that comes at a personal cost. Our communities do a phenomenal job, but they should not have to. Urban areas would never settle for that absence of provision, so why should we?

The Cumbria chamber of commerce last year consulted businesses throughout our county for their response to Transport for the North’s strategic review. Inadequate bus services were cited repeatedly for the toll that they were taking on the ability of businesses to recruit staff. Put simply, staff have no means of getting to work. That is a particular issue for the tourism and hospitality industry, in which staff often have to start shifts early or finish late. Lack of buses also prevents businesses in the Lake district from recruiting staff from Barrow, where the employment pool is bigger and unemployment is higher.

Bus services are essential to life for locals. They are also key to Cumbria’s vibrant tourism industry. Cumbria’s Lake district is Britain’s second biggest visitor destination after London—16 million people visited us last year. A high proportion of visitors use their free bus passes while on holiday. That is subsidised by Cumbria County Council through funds provided by the Government, but calculated according to the number of people permanently living in our community. That calculation does not count the reality of the colossal number of tourists using the service. The funding does not even begin to reflect the number of passes used in our area, and local taxpayers end up picking up the shortfall. That is one reason why there is no money to subsidise public bus
services in Cumbria; we are basically subsidising public transport for people from richer authorities who do not return the favour.

It strikes me as bizarre, standing in London as I am, that bus services here receive a £722 million annual subsidy, while in Cumbria we receive absolutely nothing. The lack of subsidy has a catastrophic impact on fares, and the extortionate prices make commuting by bus a real challenge, especially for lower-paid workers. How is it right that the 5-mile bus journey from Ambleside to Grasmere—neighbouring communities—costs £4.90, while a journey of equivalent length in London costs £1.50? The Government subsidise buses in a big city where the market is not broken, but they refuse to help in rural areas where the market absolutely is broken.

We are proud that so many people want to visit our area—we love to welcome you to Cumbria. Our tourism industry is invaluable to the economy, but investment in public services is essential to ensuring that tourism does not damage our local communities but helps them to thrive. We want to encourage our visitors to travel sustainably, but 85% of them use the motor car to get to our community and to travel around once they are there. However, we know that with the right interventions and conditions, our visitors will travel sustainably.

Tourism sector deals zone proposals include a focus on sustainability, and public bus transport is a key component of that—so we welcome it—alongside rail, boats, bikes and, of course, walking. Improved bus services could alleviate pressure on the roads that become clogged with the cars of those visiting.

The reality is that we are too late to prevent climate change, but we have perhaps a dozen years left to avoid a major climate catastrophe, with real and appalling human consequences. [Interruption.]

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. [Interruption.] Order. Could you sit down in the Public Gallery and be quiet, please. Thank you. Mr Farron—[Interruption.] Please, this is a debating chamber; it is not for members of the public to take part in the debate. I am awfully sorry, but thank you for leaving. I am sorry, Mr Farron. Would you like to continue?

Tim Farron: Thank you, Dame Cheryl.

The reality, whether we like it or not, is that climate change is happening. The question is whether we can prevent a climate catastrophe that will have huge impacts on human beings in this country and across the globe. Tackling this global disaster will take change in every community and lots of steps that add up to a bigger picture. Public transport is an element of that. In order for there to be success globally, we in the Lakes are determined to act locally. Our community bus services prove that determination.

Two new platforms are being funded and opened at Manchester Piccadilly railway station. That important public investment in infrastructure and the economy through the northern powerhouse is good news, but where is the equivalent for the rural north? The transport spend in the north-west per head of population is still barely half that in London, despite promises made when the northern powerhouse was formed. I will continue to fight the cuts to individual bus services. I will continue to stand with and work with the community to find alternative solutions, just as we are currently doing for Arnside, Levens, Cartmel, Hincaster and Kendal. But let us be honest: that is not good enough. The concept of the northern powerhouse is great, but from Cumbria’s perspective it is not much of a powerhouse and it is not very northern.

If new platforms at Manchester Piccadilly are an investment that will boost the Manchester city region’s economy, a comprehensive bus service in rural Cumbria is the investment to boost the Cumbrian economy, so that is my proposal today: that the Minister should ensure the direct commissioning of a comprehensive, affordable and reliable rural bus network in Cumbria. Will the Minister do that as a key plank of the northern powerhouse?

The bus service running through the south Lakes along the A6 and the A591 is the 555. Running from Lancaster to Keswick, it serves Milnthorpe, Kendal, Staveley, Windermere, Ambleside and Grasmere. It is a reliable service, but extremely expensive. The Kendal to Ambleside journey was recently revealed as the second most expensive route in the country. But if we look at the 555 as the trunk service, what we have seen over the last 30 years has been the slow but steady hacking off of the twigs and the branches. If people do not live in one of the communities along the main south Lakes route, they are more than likely without a bus service. Therefore, what I am asking for is a new commissioned service that will bring back buses to every community and breathe new life into the public transport of the Lakes.

If the Government keep ignoring the plight of rural communities, we will keep fighting for ourselves, rolling up our sleeves, making our own luck and finding solutions against the odds, but we would love it if they would stop ignoring us and instead commission a comprehensive rural bus service to exceed anything that we have seen before, even 35 years ago before deregulation. It will be an investment that revives rural communities, boosts our economy, tackles isolation and connects our towns and villages. I plead with the Minister to be ambitious and to back that proposal.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Before I ask the Minister to respond to the debate, may I thank you, Mr Farron, for bearing with the interruption, and may I place on the record our thanks to the Doorkeeper for dealing on our behalf with that interruption?

4.17 pm

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (George Freeman): Thank you for that, Dame Cheryl. I echo those sentiments and thanks.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale (Tim Farron) on securing the debate and thank him for raising this issue. He now has a meeting in the diary with my noble Friend Baroness Vere, who leads on buses in the Department. It is an absolute pleasure for me to respond to the debate, partly because, as a rural MP for Mid Norfolk, I share many of the hon. Gentleman’s frustrations at the neglect of rural buses over decades, but also because, as the newly appointed Minister for the future of transport, with responsibility in the Department for a new portfolio and leading on tackling disconnection, decarbonisation, digitalisation and innovation in the private and public transport sectors, I welcome the chance to speak to the
issues that he has raised and to highlight some of the things that we are doing to turbocharge the improvement of rural connectivity.

The hon. Gentleman and I, and indeed the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), recognise as I think all rural MPs do, that public transport and particularly buses in rural areas are essential to connectivity to the workplace, but also for access to public services, particularly healthcare and education. Often in these debates, however, those of us who bemoan the lack of investment and support for rural buses over the years forget that there is still a very substantial service. There are 4 billion bus journeys a year.

Buses remain the most popular form of public transport. Overall, passenger satisfaction remains consistently high, at 85%. I happen to think that the figures are probably higher in urban areas than in some of the rural areas, such as Mid Norfolk and Westmorland and Lonsdale. None the less, I place it on the record that buses are popular and are vital for the connectivity of rural communities and, of course, vital for productivity and general economic wellbeing. For the many people visiting areas such as the Lake district, buses are key.

For the first time in my memory, we have a Prime Minister who has been a Mayor—it is certainly the first time we have had a Prime Minister who makes model buses—and who actually has a passion for public transport, and for places, buses and connectivity, which is all to the good. It is for that reason that I am here today to signal the levelling up of our ambition for rural connectivity. Indeed, the first request that the Prime Minister made to me when he asked me to take on this role was to drive better innovation and faster connectivity, to reach out to those people and places left behind, which is a subject the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale and I have both spoken about and written on widely.

That is why I am delighted that in the last few weeks the Government have announced a new £220 million bus deal and committed to a long-term bus strategy. We may say that is long overdue, but it is happening none the less, and I am delighted. Crucially, it will focus on the passengers who rely on the services, rather than the providers, and we will also look at how national and local government, and the private and public sectors, can work together to improve value for money and to get a better deal from not only the additional money, but the money that we have already put in.

Each year the Department for Transport provides £250 million in direct revenue support for bus services in England via the bus service operators grant. Without that, fares would increase and marginal services would disappear in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency and mine. Around £43 million of that grant is paid directly to local authorities, rather than to bus operators, to support socially necessary bus services in their areas that are not commercially viable. The Government recognise the importance of these services, which are essential for rural connectivity and for supplementing the often patchy private provision of, for example, evening or Sunday services, which may not be available.

To improve current bus services or to restore lost services, the Government will pay an extra £30 million of new funding to local authorities to help tackle that problem, in addition to the £1 billion a year currently spent by local authorities on concessionary bus passes. We also committed to protecting the national bus travel concession, which benefits around 10 million people, allowing free, off-peak local travel anywhere in England. That concession provides older and disabled people with greater freedom, independence and a lifeline to their community, and enables access to facilities in their local area and helps them to keep in touch with family and friends.

In policy making, it is sometimes easy to overlook the essential nature of rural public transport for basic, functioning communities and connectivity. Living in a great city such as London during the week, one sees transport at our fingertips, on demand when we want it. In rural areas such as the hon. Gentleman’s and mine, it is not like that. No one expects it to be identical—we want diversity—but we have to recognise that connectivity is fundamental to a functioning society and economy. That is why we are going further and why we need to be more innovative.

Digitalisation and basic telephony now make a whole range of new services possible. Demand-responsive transport services have been used for some time to replace infrequent traditional services that do not meet a local community’s specific needs, or to get services closer to where people live at a time that is convenient for them—and we are about to go further and faster. We will start to look at places, counties and districts and ask where the people who most need to be moved around actually are, and at what time of day, and whether one bus running infrequently down one road is the right way to do that. Could we use technology to provide a more mixed package of lift-share, car-share, community bus and traditional and modern bus services?

To trial on-demand services in rural and suburban areas, the Government have established a new £20 million fund as part of that bus deal. I am delighted to tell the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale that, as part of that, I will be championing innovation in rural areas. As part of the future mobility zones that I am putting in place, we will look specifically at rural mobility, not just at inner-city and urban mobility, where so much of the innovation has tended to be.

The hon. Gentleman rightly paid tribute to the many people up and down rural Britain who contribute to community transport and support their communities. I echo that. Approximately 8 million passenger trips take place in rural areas every year, which has a huge impact on encouraging growth and reducing isolation. Community transport operators can access the bus service operators grant to help keep fares down and to run a wider network of services than they could otherwise afford to run. Community transport spend from this grant was substantially above £3 million in 2018-19.

Data, technology and innovation are making possible a whole range of new services, which is why access to digitalisation for rural bus services is a crucial part of what we are doing next. Passengers rightly expect easy access to comprehensive and high-quality information about local bus services. People want to know where they can catch a bus, when it will come, what the fare will be and how they can pay. With more and more people having smartphones in their pockets, it is surely possible for us to run a more digital and demand-responsive service.
The bus data powers in the Bus Services Act 2017 will go further than the partnership provisions, requiring all bus operators of local services in England to open up real-time information on routes, timetables, fares and tickets to passengers from next year. These improvements aim to remove uncertainty in bus journeys, improve journey planning and help passengers secure best-value tickets.

However, we will go further. Notwithstanding potential electoral disruptions, I shortly expect to announce future mobility zones, our flagship project for supporting innovation in future transport. Crucially, I will be looking at rural as well as urban areas. We will look at pilots on demand-responsive services such as those in Lincolnshire and in the Tees Valley, which was announced this week by the Mayor of Teesside, Ben Houchen.

I will close by congratulating the hon. Member for Westmorland and Lonsdale and genuinely thanking him for securing the debate, which has given us the chance to raise these issues. His points on the northern powerhouse were well made, and I will pass those on to the Minister responsible. The truth is that there is no single solution, and we should not seek some magic bullet. He is right to highlight that rural areas demand a different solution from urban areas. Equally, he is right to highlight that while cities such Manchester—the heartbeat of the northern powerhouse—are growing and investing, we need to look at nearby rural areas, to make sure that we are not creating a two-tier transport system.

The commitment from the Government and myself is clear: to maintain and improve local public transport. We also commit to go further, using this £200 million bus package to improve and support innovation in rural public transport, so that we have a mixed economy that works for the benefit of communities and businesses in rural areas. The Government are 100% committed to that. The Prime Minister is committed to that. I hope that we get a chance after the next election to put that into practice.

Question put and agreed to.
Paul Girvan (South Antrim) (DUP): I want to highlight the benefits we receive from the likes of Ulster University. Its Harry Ferguson building, a centre for innovation, brings forward many world-leading manufacturing products, which will revolutionise the future. But sometimes we fail to embrace the great innovation that we have in Northern Ireland. In my constituency, Conemaster developed a safety product for laying out cones on motorways. Unfortunately, it was set aside by the UK Government and those who want to run things here. It is important that we buy from, and support, local industry, and do not promote others.

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): I remind hon. Members that interventions must be brief.

Emma Little Pengelly: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention, which was so good that I almost intervened on him. I absolutely agree. We have incredible companies. Politicians from all parties, but particularly the Democratic Unionist party, have always been proud to showcase and promote those companies, in London, the UK and across the globe. I have had the privilege and pleasure of accompanying many of those businesses on trade missions across the globe. I can see the huge interest in the innovation and creativity of those companies.

The Democratic Unionist party has often been referred to as the party of business in Northern Ireland. Some may disagree with that, and we do not always agree with business on everything, but one thing is clear: the Democratic Unionist party is a proud pro-business party. We recognise that supporting business is critical to supporting our economy, and growth in our economy is critical to getting new opportunities for young people and building a better future for them. We know that shared prosperity in Northern Ireland will bring shared stability. That is essential for Northern Ireland as it emerges from decades of trouble and division, and their legacy, which we still deal with; we know that growing the economy is key.

That is why, in 2007, when the Northern Ireland Assembly was restored, the Democratic Unionist party made growing the economy in Northern Ireland the No. 1 priority. We do so by building a coalition with all the other parties that agree that growing the economy is the best way to get a bright and better future for all in Northern Ireland, across all communities: Catholic and Protestant, Unionist and nationalist, and new and other communities that do not define in that way. We want everybody in Northern Ireland to succeed, and to have the best opportunities, and we recognise that one critical way of doing that is to have a robust, growing and strong economy in Northern Ireland.

David Simpson (Upper Bann) (DUP): My hon. Friend is making a very good speech. She mentioned large companies, but the backbone of Northern Ireland is small, family businesses. We have helped those in manufacturing with rates relief and other measures. Regarding innovation, we have the Young Enterprise programmes, which are coming through into small businesses to give them some initiative. I am sure she will also welcome that.

Emma Little Pengelly: I absolutely agree. Later in my speech, I will come to the various aspects of our economy in Northern Ireland, and the particular issues, challenges and opportunities they face.

Northern Ireland is the smallest region of the United Kingdom, making up just 3% of the UK, but we still make a mighty contribution, and have a mighty story to tell. All of us here from Northern Ireland want it to play an even greater part in what is often referred to here as global Britain, but we would like to see a truly global United Kingdom agenda, in which every part of this United Kingdom is fully integrated and promoted and each region pulls its weight.

Sammy Wilson (East Antrim) (DUP): Does my hon. Friend accept that one of the downsides of the current withdrawal agreement is that although we are a major exporting region of the UK, we might find ourselves prevented from taking part in trade deals that the Government might strike with other parts of the world because of the way in which we are tied into the EU?

Emma Little Pengelly: As a member of the International Trade Committee, I am very aware of the opportunities, challenges and barriers that full participation in international trade entails. It will come as no surprise to hon. Members to learn that I will mention the ‘B’ word—Brexit—later in my speech, and specifically the dreadful proposal for the Northern Ireland economy. My right hon. Friend’s points are valid; that constitutes a real and present risk to our economy.

Northern Ireland, just 3% of the United Kingdom, relies hugely on trade with the rest of the United Kingdom. Great Britain is the biggest market by far for Northern Ireland—bigger than the Republic of Ireland, the European Union and the rest of the world combined. Over the past 10 to 20 years, and certainly since the restoration of the Assembly in 2007, huge effort has been put into increasing our exports, and the market for our exports in other countries in the European Union and across the world, but Great Britain remains our biggest market, which we rely on hugely. Any barriers to trade with it would have significant impacts. I will touch on that later.

A factor that is discussed less often in this debate is consumer choice. Consumers in Northern Ireland rely hugely on the Great British market for goods, from the supermarket goods that we see in common high-street shops, to bespoke and craft products in smaller, family-owned shops. Many of those goods come from Great Britain, and there are real concerns about how people will access them. Many people today access goods through online marketplaces, such as Amazon, eBay and Etsy; that, too, gives rise to concerns about consumer choice and access. Many of the companies in those marketplaces are based in Great Britain, and many are very small producers; barriers might prevent them from posting their products to shops and consumers in Northern Ireland.

As a small region of the United Kingdom, we rely heavily on its economy, but Northern Ireland has a really strong case to make. As we have gone round the world trying to attract new businesses and, particularly, foreign direct investment to Northern Ireland, we have been able to showcase the fact that we have the highest skills in the United Kingdom. We have three excellent universities: Ulster University, Queen’s University in the heart of my Belfast South constituency, and the Open University, which does a huge amount of work. We also have high skills and a good education system. That is not to say that we do not have challenges—I have
spoken about the challenges of trying to support every child to succeed in getting skills—but we are one of the highest-skilled regions in the United Kingdom.

We have relatively low staff turnover, which is very attractive to businesses moving to Northern Ireland, because they know that if they take those staff on, train them, and invest in them, they will show loyalty. Indeed, I think we have the lowest staff turnover in the United Kingdom, which is comparatively unique. A company looking to come to the United Kingdom will also find relatively low set-up costs in Northern Ireland, as well as people who can support it through the process, and comparatively low recurring running costs.

We have a strong case to make, but of course there have been challenges. Over the past 15 years, the Republic of Ireland has cut its corporation tax rate and again to make it even more competitive, knowing that our corporation tax rate is tied to that of the rest of the United Kingdom, and is therefore significantly higher. The Republic of Ireland has created tax incentive packages that I would describe as innovative, particularly to attract big US companies such as Facebook and Apple. We want to be able to attract those companies, too. Since 2007, working closely with Invest NI, Northern Ireland has had a very strong record; in fact, for some years, it attracted more FDI than any region of the United Kingdom outside London and south-east England. For a small region with the challenges that we had, that is a really strong story to tell. It is a story that we should be proud of—but we want more. We want to do better, and we need to do better, because we still have challenges and we still do not have the types of jobs that we want for our young people: high-value, stable jobs that young people with the right skills can move into, creating happy, healthy lives for themselves and their families with the prosperity that we want to bring.

**Sammy Wilson:** My hon. Friend is right that it is not just jobs that we want, but good-quality jobs. Does she agree that when the Assembly was working properly, one of its successes was in attracting such jobs? Indeed, about 50% of the jobs attracted through FDI paid wages above the average wage in Northern Ireland.

**Emma Little Pengelly:** I absolutely agree. Statistics released in recent days indicate that although we have had growth in the average wage, it has now slowed down, and there has been a slowdown at the high-value end of jobs. In Northern Ireland we have comparatively low unemployment, but those statistics do not necessarily show the whole story. My constituency of Belfast South has one of the lowest unemployment rates not just in Northern Ireland, but across the United Kingdom—but too many of those jobs are at the lower end. We need high-value jobs that pay people better, because there is significant in-work poverty. The best way to get out of poverty is with a well-paid job. People need jobs with stability to help them to support themselves and their family.

We also have persistently high levels of economic inactivity. Although people point to that inactivity, the reality is that right now we cannot just match it with jobs growth. We need good programmes to support people, regardless of why they are economically inactive. In Northern Ireland, we have a higher than average percentage of students, who are currently defined as economically inactive, but those are not necessarily the people we are worried about; we are worried about those who have been economically inactive for some considerable time. Even more worrying are people in families who suffer from transgenerational unemployment. They need the right support and skills programmes, at the right level.

This is not just about getting people entry-level jobs; we want them to skill up and make progress. I have heard House of Commons statistics about how many people go into an entry-level job and stay at that level for their entire career. Social mobility and support for people throughout their career, so that they can increase their wages and their family income, are essential to the shared prosperity to which we are committed.

Let me touch on a few particular aspects. I have already mentioned foreign direct investment. Northern Ireland’s economy is still very much one of small to medium-sized, largely family-owned businesses, as my hon. Friend the Member for Upper Bann (David Simpson) said. The Democratic Unionist party absolutely wants to support those businesses, but many of them are understandably reluctant to take risks in order to grow—people are content with the strong business that they have built not just for themselves, but for their children and family. We want to encourage those businesses because we need them to grow, but they should be able to take those risks in an environment in which they feel confident and positive. I will say a little more about family and small businesses in a moment.

I know that the Minister will have had meetings with Invest NI and received briefings. I pay tribute to the incredible work of Alastair Hamilton, who I worked with many years ago. He has done a fantastic job in very difficult circumstances, particularly in the past few years, to keep increasing foreign direct investment and high-value jobs. Since the collapse of the Northern Ireland Assembly more than 1,000 days ago, one of the small glimmers of light has been the fact that Invest NI has been able to continue to make jobs announcements, including in my constituency, and to create the opportunities that we really need. Under the framework set by the Northern Ireland Assembly, Alastair Hamilton and his Invest NI colleagues were able to continue going into the global marketplace, winning contracts and attracting companies to Northern Ireland. We want to build on his incredible work; as he moves on from the job, we are all thankful for the amazing competent work that he has put in.

We are keen to continue to play a full role in attracting foreign direct investment. We can do so much through our regional organisations, such as Invest NI, but as the Democratic Unionist party has pointed out to the Government on a number of occasions, our sell in Northern Ireland must be fully integrated into what the United Kingdom does on a global scale. We want to be fully included in what is being offered, including trade fairs, engagement with countries, and trade missions. Some progress has been made, but we want more. I am sure that Members of Parliament from Scotland, Wales, the north of England and other regions also feel that, historically, their region has not been fully included and integrated in the sell of the UK Government. I have raised that issue on many occasions with the Secretary of State for International Trade, and with the Department for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy. Progress has been made, but we want to build on it, and we want more of our companies to take part.
We know that innovation is the way forward. Northern Ireland will never be a low-cost manufacturer, but we have been, can be and will be high-quality, innovative and creative in our manufacture, industry and services, and in the skills that we bring to them. Investment in innovation is therefore very welcome. Some investment in research and development has been affected by constraints around state aid and other aspects of the European Union. As we move forward from that, we want a continuation of the investment in innovation, research and skills that we have had before.

The Government have spoken on this issue on a number of occasions, and I certainly welcome the very warm words that they have used. However, we would like concrete proposals on how Northern Ireland will get its fair share from any central programme to support innovation, research and development, and on how Northern Ireland can be more successful in bidding for central funds, to try to get the help and support that our businesses need to grow.

I have mentioned a number of universities, but as the Member of Parliament for Belfast South, I will of course mention once again Queen’s University, which does fantastic work in innovation; in fact, it is leading the way in a number of areas.

I am very conscious that we need to identify the potential growth areas. In what areas can Northern Ireland show unique creativity and innovation? In terms of the UK as a whole, what can we do to be particularly attractive to foreign direct investment and growing businesses? We have done huge amounts in areas such as cyber-security and finance.

David Simpson: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way again. An issue raised with me time and again is research and skills that we have had before. However, we would like concrete proposals on how Northern Ireland will get its fair share from any central programme to support innovation, research and development, and on how Northern Ireland can be more successful in bidding for central funds, to try to get the help and support that our businesses need to grow.

I have mentioned a number of universities, but as the Member of Parliament for Belfast South, I will of course mention once again Queen’s University, which does fantastic work in innovation; in fact, it is leading the way in a number of areas.

Emma Little Pengelly: Absolutely. The Northern Ireland Executive and Assembly were in a really good place to listen to businesses about their needs, and the challenges that they found when trying to apply for those types of funds—the red tape and other difficulties. In future, particularly post-Brexit, we will need a Government who are responsive to the question of how we can support businesses to grow in a way that works for them and their owners, because those owners have enough to do running those businesses, and focusing on what they are good at. The Government need to support firms in a flexible way, and give them the right tools and encouragement to grow.

I will briefly refer to our small and family businesses, particularly retail businesses on our high streets. I mentioned this issue last night in a debate in the main Chamber. As is the case across the United Kingdom, our high streets are under a huge amount of pressure, but unfortunately, we have not been able to access the same amount of support as other areas. I welcomed the Government announcement of additional support for high streets through the future high streets fund, but of course Northern Ireland was not able to use that money, because it went into the Northern Ireland block grant as an unhypothecated Barnett consequential, which meant that it was not ring-fenced for that purpose. As there is no Northern Ireland Assembly at the moment, there is no accountability, there is no way that elected Members and the people of Northern Ireland can push civil servants to spend that money on high streets.

We all know that our retail sector in our towns, villages, and small urban areas in cities is crying out for help; that is common right across this United Kingdom. Those areas are suffering from high business rates; they feel crippled by the bills that they receive. The shopping habits of consumers are changing, so small businesses are struggling. Very often, they are family-owned, and the owner actually works in the business. They need this help, but I met the head of the civil service to urge him to put that money towards retail, and there is no indication that that has happened.

That brings me to something that I have spoken about many times since I was elected as a Member of Parliament in 2017, namely that there is no Northern Ireland Assembly to listen to what the economy needs, and to do what it needs to do. That genuinely grieves me. The people of Northern Ireland, including our business people, are deeply frustrated. They want politicians to get back to work, to get back into the Northern Ireland Assembly and to start investing to grow our economy.

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I thank my hon. Friend for giving way. I wanted to make a contribution, and I want to start the debate about Brexit.

Emma Little Pengelly: Absolutely, and I—

Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson: I will try to move on as swiftly as I can. I was coming on to the next section in my speech, which is on Brexit. Your comment is probably a good indication that I should not speak for very long on Brexit, Dame Cheryl; despite the fact that I could do so, I will not do so.

I absolutely agree with my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson). However, before I move on to speak very briefly about Brexit, I will mention business rates, because our smaller retail businesses and other businesses on the high street have been crying out for reform of business rates.
I was chair of the Finance Committee in the Northern Ireland Assembly just before the collapse of the Assembly, so I know that business rates were an issue that we were looking at, because Northern Ireland had led the way in rate support for small businesses. Unfortunately, however, since then, the rest of the United Kingdom caught up with us, and then moved past us, so our businesses are now suffering from business rates that are higher than those for small businesses across the rest of the United Kingdom.

The Democratic Unionist party wants fundamental reform of business rates; we recognise that there needs to be additional support for our small businesses. We are up for that challenge; we want to have that discussion; and we need a Northern Ireland Assembly back in action to do it. However, in the absence of the Assembly, I strongly urge the Minister to do what he can to listen to business, and to work within the regime that we have in Northern Ireland to give that much-needed support to small business.

I will very briefly touch on Brexit. A number of my right hon. and hon. Friends have already made contributions about it, and I will not repeat what they said, especially because I know a number of other Members still want to make a contribution about it. Nevertheless, it is absolutely right that any barriers between Northern Ireland and Great Britain—east-west or west-east—will create greater bureaucracy and disruption, and will threaten the economy that we rely on.

The fabric of that economy is complex. It encompasses everything from the large manufacturers and large businesses that have come in, to the supermarkets, right down to the business owner who runs a gift shop and brings in 10 or 20 pottery mugs, bowls or whatever it may be from a small supplier in Great Britain. When we work through all the detail, we can see where there could be significant additional costs and significantly more bureaucracy. These businesses may actually have problems in getting supplies. That is the difficulty for many, many businesses.

We have raised that issue, because the Democratic Unionist party will always stand up for what is good for Northern Ireland. What is bad for business—what puts up barriers—is bad for Northern Ireland. We know that, and we care about the people involved.

David Simpson: My hon. Friend touched on business rates. I understand that there will be a rate review next year in Northern Ireland; as a party, we should use our influence to try to do something for the retail sector.

Emma Little Pengelly: I absolutely agree with my hon. Friend. However, I am getting a huge amount of pressure on my right from my hon. Friend the Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon), who is very keen to speak; I know that because he never gets to speak in Westminster Hall. So I will wind up.

In conclusion, I am passionate about supporting the economy in Northern Ireland, and I hope that I have got that across very firmly today. I am passionate about making Northern Ireland work. I am passionate about helping Northern Ireland to thrive. That must mean creating jobs, opportunities and a brighter, more prosperous future for all in Northern Ireland, across all the communities. We recognise that. I recognise that happy, contented people in this Union—in this United Kingdom—will not vote for the chaos, change and decades of transition that leaving this United Kingdom would bring. Members of our party genuinely care about the people of Northern Ireland, and we want our businesses, economy, industry and people to succeed.

Several hon. Members rose—

Dame Cheryl Gillan (in the Chair): Order. Regrettably, I have to impose a three-minute time limit on speeches. I am pleased to call Jim Shannon.

4.59 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): Thank you, Dame Cheryl—hallelujah to get the chance to comment. Northern Ireland is on the cusp of greatness. In football and sport we are doing great things, but our economy is doing even better, with international investment in the IT sector and a booming financial industry. Newtownards, the main town in my constituency, is a commuter town; it is about half an hour from Belfast on the wonderful Glider service. Many people from the town, and indeed from across the Ards peninsula and the wider Strangford constituency, find job opportunities in the Belfast area.

The Minister for retail, the hon. Member for Rochester and Strood (Kelly Tolhurst), came to Newtownards to get an idea of how the towns and the retail end are working. Unemployment in Strangford is at its lowest level for many years. I understand that the Government have acknowledged that FinTech is one of the fastest-growing sectors in the UK economy, and Northern Ireland is increasingly recognised as an important destination for new development and investment in FinTech, with more than 36,000 people employed in the financial services sector. We have just had the appointment of a new FinTech envoy for Northern Ireland, Mr Jenkins, which I and my party welcome.

I also welcome the confidence and supply motion. Just this week the Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport announced further rural network broadband investment. Coverage will go from 78% of Northern Ireland to 91%, as the Secretary of State said in the Chamber yesterday. That is good, but it cannot be the extent of Government support for the economy and innovation in Northern Ireland. As I said in March, we have the potential to do so much more. We have state-of-the-art office spaces, UK-wide connectivity and low business rates.

We are a place to invest in, with a high-class graduate labour force and an abundance of administrative staff. As a shooting man, I would say that all the ducks are in a row. It is perfect for Northern Ireland at the moment. Queen’s University, with its innovation in health, its partnerships with companies across the world and its students, adds to that. Pharmaceuticals are doing exceptionally well in my constituency—although they could do better—as is the agri-food sector. TG Eakin in pharmaceuticals, Mash Direct, McCann’s and Willowbrook Foods, Rich Sauces and Lakeland Dairies are all in place.

We could do something on corporation tax to enable us to be more competitive with the Republic of Ireland. We have the rental property space, the skilled labour force, the connectivity and the ability to reach an airport within an hour for most of Northern Ireland—we have
it all. We need a Government in our corner helping us to attract international investment and fighting for us as an integral part of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, because we are better together—as opposed to something that seemingly works against us—in something that benefits the entire UK body.

5.2 pm

Ian Paisley (North Antrim) (DUP): It is an honour to serve with you in the Chair, Dame Cheryl. The wonderful speech of my hon. Friend the Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) really put into perspective the fact that not only does Northern Ireland want to play its part in the economy of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland, but it plays its part in the world. That is very important, because we have a great history. She mentioned standing on the shoulders of giants. Currently, 10% of all global financial exchange networks flow through Belfast, and 10% of all cholesterol tests for the world flow through Randox Laboratories in Northern Ireland. Northern Ireland plays a significant part in the world economy.

We are therefore anxious for Northern Ireland to do more, and for the Government to recognise and facilitate that, not cut us off from our mainstream economy. In simple terms, about £18 billion-worth of trade is done every year between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom; and about £6 billion is done with the Republic of Ireland and the EU. I know which side of the fence traders in my constituency and across Northern Ireland want to be on. It is therefore critical that we get that balance right.

We have five very simple requests for the Government. First, reduce corporation tax in Northern Ireland. Stop footling around with other things in Northern Ireland and deal with corporation tax. Reduce it to 10%. Make Northern Ireland the attractive place that it should be for businesses to invest in. Secondly, remove airport passenger duty for our region and allow us to compete properly with Dublin airport, which is stealing customers, who do not turn left when they get off the aeroplanes in the Republic of Ireland but stay in the Republic.

We need those customers to come to Belfast. Thirdly, therefore, incentivise airline carriers to land in Northern Ireland so that we can have more tourism and more businesspeople. Fourthly, remove VAT on tourism and hospitality so that we can compete fairly with our land-border neighbour. Fifthly, build a bridge. Give us that connection between Northern Ireland and the rest of the United Kingdom. Let the constituents of my right hon. Friend the Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) leave Larne and drive to Scotland, and then drive back again on the same day. Allow them to have that great opportunity, which they really need.

In the last few seconds of my speech, I want to thank the Government for their efforts to keep a brilliant manufacturing company, Wrightbus, alive in Northern Ireland. That will create tens of thousands of opportunities for people in the years ahead.

5.5 pm

Stephen Pound (Ealing North) (Lab): Let us agree on one thing: Northern Ireland is the home of innovation. There has been a long history of that, from the modern tractor through to the Sunderland flying boat. Wrightbus and Shorts Missile Systems. In fact, most of the ejection seats in modern fighter planes are made in Northern Ireland. There is no argument that we have that extraordinary history; that seedbed of innovation, which is flourishing.

When we go to places such as Lagan College and speak to young people who are working in completely new businesses and industries, we realise that the base material is there. So what can we do, as Government, to facilitate the flowering of that innovation and great skill? When, 20-odd years ago, we had a problem with the aggregates industry because of the fiscal harmonisation issue cross-border, the Government were able to work with the aggregates industry in Northern Ireland to equalise the rates of exchange on tariffs, in order to facilitate that local business. However, that is just a tiny bit of it.

We have a philosophical question here: how do we actually support industry and innovation? The days of DeLorean, of parachuting in large amounts of money and of top-down intervention are long gone. We have to work in an entirely different way. Look at companies such as Thales, based in my constituency.

Ian Paisley: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Stephen Pound: Am I allowed to take an intervention?

Ian Paisley: Yes, and you get an extra minute. I am delighted that the hon. Gentleman has given way, because he talked about the real innovation in Northern Ireland. This week I visited a company called Creative Composites in the constituency of my right hon. Friend the Member for Lagan Valley (Sir Jeffrey M. Donaldson). They make the entire shell of the new London taxi.

Stephen Pound: That is an extremely interesting point, and I am extremely grateful to the hon. Gentleman—

Ian Paisley: They make the 720S body for McLaren. They make the Aston Martin shell. Those things are done innovatively in Northern Ireland because they cannot be done anywhere else in the United Kingdom. That is why we should invest in Northern Ireland.

Stephen Pound: Do you know, I have no argument with that. Thales employs nearly 1,000 people in Northern Ireland, and it is there for a reason. It took over Shorts Missile Systems, and it is there because of the highly skilled, highly motivated, highly trained and highly capable workforce. What can we, as Government, do to help? In my days in the Navy, the number of marine engineers who came from Northern Ireland was extraordinary, yet somehow we are unable to see that great tradition of engineering innovation and expertise flourish in Northern Ireland.

I could make many suggestions; I will make just a small one. The backbone of Northern Ireland industry is small and medium-sized enterprises. They have a problem with apprenticeships—I am not talking about the Apprentice Boys, but apprenticeships. A small company finds it very difficult to employ apprentices, simply because of the absence of economies of scale. In GB we used to have a thing called the MSC—the Manpower Services Commission—whereby the Government would
Chi Onwurah (Newcastle upon Tyne Central) (Lab): It is a pleasure and an honour to serve under your chairpersonship, Dame Cheryl, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) on securing this debate. It is third time lucky for her, and also for the House, because the speech with which she opened this debate was passionate, well-informed, comprehensive, and very moving in parts. I, for one, learned a lot from it.

I am proud to represent the party that helped broker the Good Friday agreement, and the current Government’s cavalier approach to preserving that agreement in the Brexit negotiations worries me. As hon. Members have said, the Good Friday agreement is the foundation of peace and prosperity in Northern Ireland, as well as the Republic. The absence of the devolved Government in Stormont is another issue that many hon. Members have mentioned. Labour’s approach rests on increasing local, regional and national democracy, and the lack of resolution to that problem clearly undermines efforts to improve innovation and the economy of Northern Ireland.

I will begin by outlining Labour’s approach to industrial strategy and innovation. It is not a top-down approach; as my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing North (Stephen Pound) said, that is not the right approach. We aim to provide support for a devolved Administration and local councils to make decisions in support of their industry and their workers. We have talked a lot in recent months about the differences between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, but there are also many similarities, particularly with my home region, the north-east of England. As the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) likes to point out every time he intervenes in one of my Adjournment debates, there are many similarities between our regions, particularly our economies and the investment in making and building things over the centuries. The hon. Member for Belfast South spoke movingly about that in the context of Northern Ireland, as well as the years of deindustrialisation and under-investment in infrastructure and education that have left Northern Ireland with some significant economic challenges.

The legendary Harland and Wolff shipyard was recently saved from collapse because workers staged a nine-week sit-in in protest to show that it was still viable, but those who took redundancy face an uncertain future. Wrightbus has also been mentioned—a company that had been operating since 1946, but which closed its doors in September, threatening 1,200 jobs. It was recently bought by the Bamford family after going into administration, although we still do not know what its workers’ fate will be, particularly as the Government propose a Brexit deal that would place trading barriers between that company and the rest of the UK. The right hon. Member for East Antrim (Sammy Wilson) and the hon. Member for Strangford emphasised the negative impact that would have.

Ian Paisley: The business that the hon. Lady has alluded to is in my constituency. It was a very significant employer, equivalent to about 60,000 jobs if it were based here in the mainland, and I am delighted that the Bamford family have invested in it. It is a new chapter for the industry, bringing hydro technology to Northern Ireland. Hopefully, as a result we will get the cleanest, greenest public transport in not only the UK but the world.

Chi Onwurah: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention, and I will return to that example. However, my point is that this does not reflect a sound industrial strategy, precisely because the old company collapsed because of its UK customers moving to electric buses and the new company will be making electric buses. A serious industrial strategy would have a plan for transport that could have incentivised the company to move in that direction without the chaos of administration and the sale to a Tory donor, in order to achieve the same outcome. That sort of creative destruction might excite certain Government advisers, but it puts workers under severe stress and often results in employment under worse terms and conditions, as the former employees are in a weaker bargaining position.

That process of collapse and asset stripping is related to the problem of the financialisation of our economy. The last decade has seen the UK economy centred on London and the south-east of England, with a focus on financial services rather than producing things. As the economist Mariana Mazzucato argues, the financial sector has stopped resourcing the real economy. Instead of investing in companies that produce stuff, finance is financing finance. Financialisation changes the motors behind economic activity, giving investors with short-term interests more control over firms, and its legacies are low productivity and low pay. Labour is committed to changing that and putting innovation at the centre of our economy, using our world-class universities—such as Ulster University, and Queen’s University in the constituency of the hon. Member for Belfast South—as drivers of growth, rather than putting off scientific talent from across the world with cruel immigration policies.

Labour’s “innovation nation” mission would raise research and development to 3% of GDP—almost twice what it is now—using science and industry to benefit the whole country. We need to maintain our current centres of excellence, but must also ensure that every region can benefit from innovation and growth. That is why we are committed to putting technology and innovation at the heart of the lowest-paid and least productive sectors. The hon. Member for Belfast South spoke movingly of the need for social mobility in work, which
requires increased productivity. We want to restart manufacturing, but we know that most jobs are in the service sector. Some 17% of people employed in Northern Ireland work in wholesale and retail, in the everyday economy. That is why we have plans to create a retail catapult to support those workers.

Much of our additional R&D spend would be drawn on by our industrial strategy missions, such as investing in carbon capture and storage as part of our commitment to decarbonise our economy, delivering hundreds of thousands of green jobs in the process. We propose a £250 billion national investment bank, made up of a network of regional development banks that would properly put regional needs first and restore regional decision making. Earlier this year, the Northern Ireland Chamber of Commerce said that 77% of service sector firms and 74% of manufacturers were having difficulty recruiting staff. Labour’s national education service will support reskilling, delivering education free at the point of demand from cradle to grave and ensuring that we have the skills that businesses need.

Although the DUP might have secured £200 million in next year’s Budget through its deal with the Government, recent weeks have shown how quickly the Government can change their mind. Labour’s £250 billion national transformation fund would invest in transport and digital infrastructure across the UK without preconditions.

Finally, I will turn to the topic of Brexit. In the 2014-20 block of EU funding, Northern Ireland was allocated a total of £3.5 billion—significantly more than the Government’s offer to the DUP. As we have rightly opposed the Government’s shambolic Brexit deal, we have to question whether that funding will even be delivered. Will the Minister commit to publishing an assessment of the impact on the Northern Irish economy of putting extra tariffs on trade between Northern Ireland and the rest of the UK, and making sure that that impact is not negative? Will he also follow Labour’s plan and commit to maintaining the EU levels of structural investment as a minimum? Finally, given the current trade tariffs on EU exports after the row over subsidies to Airbus, what commitment will he give to aerospace workers in Northern Ireland?

5.19 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Mr Robin Walker): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Dame Cheryl, and I join many other Members in congratulating the hon. Member for Belfast South (Emma Little Pengelly) on a superb speech and on having secured this debate—third time lucky. I was disappointed when previous debates were postponed, and am delighted that we have had the opportunity to have this debate today and hear some excellent speeches.

The hon. Lady rightly spoke about Northern Ireland’s proud industrial history and its bright, optimistic future as part of the UK. I strongly believe in upholding the constitutional integrity of the United Kingdom—a family of four nations that are safer, stronger and more prosperous together. Northern Ireland benefits from being part of the world’s sixth-largest economy. Being part of the UK allows the 66 million people living across the four nations to work together to create jobs and opportunities.

As we have heard from many hon. Members, the Northern Ireland economy is strong, with an economic performance that sits alongside the growth of the wider UK economy. Employment is at a near-record high and unemployment is at a near-record low. The UK Government are serious in their commitment to grow the economy and to support innovation in Northern Ireland and across the whole UK.

I will set out some details of the UK Government’s investment in the Northern Ireland economy. We are delivering on our commitment for an ambitious set of city and growth deals across Northern Ireland. Since the funding announcement for the first city deal for Northern Ireland, the Belfast regions city deal, at the autumn Budget 2018, the total regional economic investment from the UK Government has exceeded £600 million. That commitment was reinforced by the Prime Minister’s announcement that £163 million has been allocated to complete the deals for the causeway coast and glens and the mid, south and west regions of Northern Ireland.

The UK Government have announced funding for all 11 council areas in Northern Ireland. That investment will significantly boost economic activity and attract private sector investment. The proposals are an example of what can be achieved when politicians of all backgrounds, local businesses, community leaders, academia and local government stakeholders come together to shape the economic future for their local areas and Northern Ireland as a whole.

Stephen Pound: The Minister is making an extremely powerful point. There are occasions when the Government can stand by and simply encourage—when they do not have to finance initiatives. Will he give credit to Thales, which I mentioned earlier, which has set up the primary engineer and secondary engineer leaders awards for Northern Ireland? That does not cost the Government anything, but provides an incentive for people in primary and secondary education in Northern Ireland to achieve awards in engineering.

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman draws attention to what the private sector can do to support apprenticeships and programmes of that sort, which of course I welcome. I also look forward to seeing the nine digital and innovation business cases from the Belfast region city deal come to fruition next year.

We are of course aware of the challenges faced by some of Northern Ireland’s iconic businesses in recent years, notably Harland and Wolff and Wrightbus. These have been very difficult times for their workforces, the families and the local communities. As the hon. Member for North Antrim (Ian Paisley) kindly paid tribute to, the Secretary of State for Northern Ireland has engaged continuously with the efforts that local hon. Members in both constituencies—the hon. Member for North Antrim and the hon. Member for Belfast East (Gavin Robinson)—have championed to bring in new investors to support those two iconic names. I join the hon. Member for North Antrim in saying that I hope those investors will deliver tens of thousands of opportunities. I believe that hydrogen-powered buses and green infrastructure can play a crucial part in achieving the UK’s aim of achieving decarbonisation, and show how Northern Ireland can continue to lead the way. So I want to see those businesses succeed.
Ian Paisley: The way for the Minister to succeed in that is to ensure that the Government here put money into hydro tech and allow hydro companies to produce the resource. He must see the way ahead as not just battery power but hydro power.

Mr Walker: The hon. Gentleman makes his bid strongly, as I would expect. I will ensure that that is passed on to the Treasury and other relevant Government Departments. Indeed, we have heard a number of bids during the debate, not all of which I can necessarily answer. Obviously, however, there are a number of opportunities coming to deal with some of those things.

People in Northern Ireland also benefit from the changes that people throughout UK enjoy that have been delivered by the Government, including an increase in the national living wage that benefits about 75,000 workers, and a fuel duty freeze for the ninth successive year that saves the average driver a cumulative £1,000 compared with under the pre-2010 escalator. Following the terrible fire in Bank Buildings, owned by Primark, in August 2018, the UK Government provided £2 million to support the recovery and regeneration of Belfast city centre in the constituency of the hon. Member for Belfast South. I am pleased that much of the city centre has been rebuilt and has reopened after that fire.

As the hon. Lady mentioned, the UK Government announced a £675 million future high streets fund to support local areas in England to develop and fund plans to make high streets fit for the future. As high streets funding and business rates are devolved, the Barnett formula was applied to Northern Ireland in the usual way, as she noted. It is for the Department of Finance and Northern Ireland civil service permanent secretaries to determine how that money should be spent.

I join the hon. Lady in wishing that we had a restored Executive and in encouraging all the politicians in Northern Ireland to come together to bring the Assembly back, so that decisions can be taken on those issues and they can move forward. Hon. Members may be aware that the Government introduced the Northern Ireland Budget Bill today, which is required to place the Northern Ireland budget, presented in February 2018, on a legal footing. Delivering that legislation demonstrates the UK Government’s commitment to providing good governance for the people of Northern Ireland in the continued absence of the Northern Ireland Executive, but of course, we all want the Executive to be restored.

Businesses in Northern Ireland can benefit from UK Government initiatives, including the British Business Bank, which has supported more than 1,200 small and medium-sized enterprises in Northern Ireland with £80 million since November 2014. In the last year, more than 1,000 loans, valued at £7.3 million, have been granted to Northern Ireland businesses. Northern Ireland businesses also have access to UK Export Finance, which has provided nearly £33 million of support for exporters in Northern Ireland. I absolutely commend the collaborative efforts of Invest NI and the UK Department for International Trade to support Northern Ireland exporters to trade across the globe and to attract investment into Northern Ireland. I join the hon. Lady in paying tribute to the work of Alastair Hamilton and in wishing his successor every success in the years to come.

As the hon. Lady will recall, the UK Government’s Board of Trade met in her Belfast constituency earlier this year, which was the first time it had met in Northern Ireland in its 400-year history. The global success of Northern Ireland firms was celebrated, with several Northern Ireland companies receiving their well-deserved Board of Trade awards.

Our prosperity and ability to build a strong economy depends on how we encourage innovation, develop high-quality jobs and skills, and support businesses throughout the UK to thrive and grow. Innovative businesses across Northern Ireland are a huge part of its success, including Armstrong Medical, which I had the pleasure of visiting at a Causeway chamber of commerce business roundtable recently.

As we have heard, Northern Ireland has globally admired universities and research institutions, such as Queen’s University Belfast and Ulster University, because we have nurtured our intellectual powerhouses with public investment. The industrial strategy challenge fund supports innovation UK-wide and has allocated £12 million in Northern Ireland to date, including specific investments in Queen’s University Belfast.

Several hon. Members have touched on the controversies about EU exit. I do not have time to respond in detail to all those points, but I will say that we need to be absolutely clear that Northern Ireland leaves the EU with the UK, and we need to make sure that trade between us continues unfettered. The hon. Member for Belfast South made the point very well about the enormous importance of the UK internal market, which we absolutely want to protect. Northern Ireland continues to be a top destination for inward investment, and we will work with Invest NI to ensure that that continues.

I recognise the hon. Lady’s comment that shared prosperity is shared opportunity. She made the case extremely well on behalf of Northern Ireland business, and I commend her for her efforts.

Emma Little Pengelly: I will not go into any more detail about what we have discussed. I thank all hon. Members who turned up and I apologise for the fact that they had to make short contributions. As I said, there are a significant number of issues—I did not touch on city deals or some of the other issues. I ask the Minister to continue to work closely with us to help Northern Ireland to grow, thrive and succeed in the future.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered Government support for the economy and innovation in Northern Ireland.

5.28 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Anne Milton (Guildford) (Ind): I beg to move, That this House has considered building out extant planning permissions.

It is a pleasure, albeit a surprise, to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Nokes.

I am here to talk about planning, which is often a contentious issue for our local councillors, and particularly for local authorities that are developing local plans, especially in constituencies with significant areas of green-belt and other protected land. Some 89% of Guildford borough and 60% of Waverley borough is in the green belt; and 36% of Guildford and 53% of Waverley is in an area of outstanding natural beauty.

In Guildford, we are very short of homes. We have around 3,000 people on Guildford Borough Council’s waiting list, with thousands more unable to buy a home due to excessively high prices, and we have correspondingly high rents. However, in Guildford and Cranleigh we need to build more homes in the right areas, with good transport links and all the necessary infrastructure, without increasing the risk of flooding, while protecting our green belt. To do that, we need investment from Government and developers.

I am sure that many Members of this House and I could spend several hours discussing the need for more homes, including more social housing and more homes that people can afford, and where those homes should be built, but I asked for this debate on a narrower area. Once local authorities have had the arguments about local plans and planning permissions—and they do have torrid arguments about them—and permission has been given, what powers do local authorities have to get the homes built? How can they get the much-needed infrastructure?

In Guildford in 2018-19, the number of homes built was 284. There is a requirement for 518 this year and 928 in 2021-22. In simple terms, that will only cover the backlog of unmet need. There is also a need, year on year, for 570 so-called affordable homes—although what is called “affordable” in Guildford is not affordable in many other parts of the country, or even in Guildford itself, so the word is open to some debate. However, taking into account that development will provide 40% of the overall housing figure, year on year, Guildford will be short of affordable homes until we reach more than 1,000 new dwellings a year.

Schemes such as Weyside urban village are subject to a housing infrastructure fund or HIF bid, which we are still waiting to hear about. We were told by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government that this was an oven-ready scheme, but still we have not heard back on that, and the Government have recently put up interest rates on local authority loans from the Public Works Loan Board from 0.8% to 1.8%.

Despite my having had numerous meetings with Ministers from the Department for Transport and the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government, Guildford’s infrastructure, both road and rail, is under extreme pressure, as is the two-lane stretch of the A3. That affects many more constituencies than just mine; it affects everybody south of Guildford. Developers will build only where there is a commitment to the delivery of infrastructure. Builders simply will not build without it; they go elsewhere, where it is easier to build.

In Cranleigh, in Waverley borough, a total of 7,640 permissions have been given since 2013, but only 1,906 homes have been built. Cranleigh is required to build 1,700 new homes over the local plan period, which is from 2013 to 2032. Of those, 1,600 have been granted permission. The largest sites in Cranleigh account for 1,348 of those dwellings, of which only 168, or 12%, had been built as of 4 September.

The figures are pretty shocking. A permission for 425 dwellings was granted in 2016, but only eight of those plots are complete; 136 dwellings were given permission in 2014, and only 69 of those plots are complete; 75 dwellings were granted permission in 2017, and 38 of those plots have been developed; 265 dwellings were given permission in 2015—four years ago—and none of those is complete; an application for 54 dwellings got permission in 2017, and of those, we have only one show home; of 125 dwellings given permission in 2015, none is complete; and on one site, where 149 dwellings were given permission in 2016, and 119 in 2018, only 52 plots are complete. As I say, developers will build only where there is infrastructure, but these permissions are crippling Cranleigh.

Cranleigh is in the countryside, beyond the green belt, and although I do not want to see building on the green belt—one of us does—we end up with development pushed on to the countryside beyond the green belt, with no account taken of sustainability, environmental protections or feasibility. Cranleigh is a wonderful village, but it has precious little transport infrastructure and no realistic means of achieving it. That has an impact on housing delivery, and developers want to keep prices high, well beyond the reach of many. Build-out is slow. I could talk about the inappropriateness of the development in Cranleigh, but that would take me into another Westminster Hall debate.

Local authorities simply do not possess enough tools to force the hand of developers. The housing delivery test is based on the completion of new dwellings, rather than planning permissions granted. In granting planning permission, local authorities can set shorter time periods in which the development must be begun, but as starting a development can mean as little as commencing an access road, or creating a hard-standing for the parking of vehicles, those time periods mean precious little. Local authorities have no carrots and no sticks at their disposal.

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): I congratulate the right hon. Lady on securing this debate. I am trying to give her a break to maybe take a mouthful of water, but I am interested in what she thinks those carrots and sticks could be.

Anne Milton: I thank the hon. Gentleman for his intervention. I will come on to exactly that; I have a few ideas.
There are numerous options available to Government to make a real difference in getting the homes that we need built. We need houses that people can afford in areas such as Guildford and Cranleigh, where prices are eye-wateringly high—the average house price in Guildford is more than £550,000—and socially rented homes. However, it sometimes feels as if successive Governments are simply unwilling to do anything that will upset the developers’ apple cart.

The options that could be available to Government include requiring developers of strategic sites in local plans to come forward with a full permission application. They already have the benefit of being in the local plan—a factor that carries significant weight when it comes to granting permission. They should have to come forward with a full application. The pretty development pictures that we see at the outline stage, which are generally in watercolours and made to look a bit like something out of a storybook, are rarely carried through into reserved matters.

Phased development on larger sites should be agreed in advance between the developer and the local planning authority and written into the section 106 agreement, so that the LPA has a more realistic idea of what will be delivered. Currently, provision of affordable housing is written into any agreement, but if all housing is viewed as a social benefit—I think all housing is a social benefit—we could include phased development targets, particularly on strategic sites, in local plans.

Starting a development should involve completing a dwelling, not just putting a bit of concrete on the land. Once the developer has committed money to laying on services and so on, they are more likely to continue. Council tax could become due on every dwelling, whether completed or not, based on agreed delivery rates. There could be compulsory purchase by Government of sites that had not delivered over, say, 10 years. There could be a higher rate of tax on land banking by non-building companies that push up the value of land. We could apply heavier taxes on developers’ land banks that contain more than five years-worth of house building, based on their current building. Developers can make money selling on plots rather than building houses; we need to capture more of the uplift value of the land, so that house building becomes the better option. We could decide not to sell public land to developers. Land capture value should be captured for the benefit of the public, not for plugging funding gaps.

Local authorities face significant sanctions for not building homes in housing development targets; developers that do not build have none whatever on them. The only cost that they bear is the cost of interest on loans that they acquire to buy the land. In fact, it is not uncommon for developers to build out just short of their targets but not up to the trigger points. For instance, I recently heard a story of a developer from whom significant amounts of money were due when it reached the 300th house—money that was critical for the infrastructure for a large site. But the developer stopped at 299. None of the other developers building on that strategic site was prepared to go ahead without that infrastructure.

I cannot see, despite protestations from many people, any real action from Government. You, Ms Nokes, raised with me an interesting point about Romsey brewery. This is a long-running case in Test Valley. The last brew was on your 11th birthday on 26 June 1983. Every time it looks like development is about to make progress, it stalls. There are residents on a site that has been partially developed for years and years. There is a similar site in Guildford; it was demolished in, I think, the 1980s. It stands right in the town centre—minutes’ walk from the station—but nothing is being built on the site. In an area such as Guildford, where, as I said, 89% of the borough is green belt, it is criminal that people who need homes—socially rented homes, homes to rent, and homes to buy at prices that they can afford—see that site sitting empty.

If we want more homes, at the very least Government need to help local authorities to deliver the infrastructure and penalise the developers, or give them significant incentives to get on and build the houses that are needed. We need the Government to take action so that we get truly sustainable development—not just development anywhere, but development that allows rewilding of our countryside, for example, and enables building on brownfield land. I am thinking of sites such as the Romsey brewery and the Plaza site in Guildford.

Guildford will remain unbuilt on for years and years unless Government do something. I know that this Government written in and previous Governments had the best intentions. What I would like to hear from the Minister and perhaps the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) is some ideas about how we get things to happen in the foreseeable future, not five years down the line.

9.43 am

Alex Cunningham (Stockton North) (Lab): It is also an unexpected pleasure for me to serve under your chairmanship, Ms Nokes. I thank the right hon. Member for Guildford (Anne Milton) for securing the debate. There is no doubt in my mind that the failure of developers to get on with the job and build the homes for which they have permission is a major factor contributing to our failure to meet the needs of people in this country.

The right hon. Lady talked about high demand for property in Guildford and real shortages. That is reflected across the country and even in the north of England, where land prices are of course less expensive. She made a comprehensive speech, and my speech will reflect much of what she said. There were interesting comments particularly on affordability. Of course, we have very different markets across the UK. I do not know what it costs to buy a three or four-bedroom house in Guildford, but if someone comes to Stockton-on-Tees, they can buy a brand-new four-bedroom house for under £200,000.

Anne Milton: In Guildford it varies slightly, but I think the average house price is about £580,000.

Alex Cunningham: There we have it—the absolute difference between different marketplaces. If someone wanted to buy a small, two-bedroom apartment in my constituency, they could buy one brand-new for under £30,000.

[Geraint Davies in the Chair]

My point is that if we had investment in the north of England similar to what there has been in the south—investment in infrastructure and in business development—perhaps people would find tremendous advantages in heading north and living there, where the standard of
living can be much higher and people have so much more disposable income even after they have paid their mortgage.

The problem is that this country is facing a housing crisis. There are 126,000 children without a home to call their own. Rough sleeping has more than doubled since 2010. Home ownership among the under-45s has fallen by 900,000 since 2010. More than 1 million people are on council waiting lists.

Labour has made many commitments on how we will address the housing crisis. We will launch the biggest council building programme for a generation. We will build for those who need it, including the very poorest and the most vulnerable, with a big boost to new social rented homes. We will stop the sell-off of social rented homes by suspending the right to buy. We will look closely at how local authorities deal with land—how they sell land if they need to sell land. The right hon. Lady talked about that, and we will look closely at how we contain the value and the price of land. We will transform the planning system with a new duty to deliver affordable homes.

We also want to encourage greater use of brownfield sites. I mentioned the site in Stockton where someone can buy a four-bedroom house for £200,000. I visited that just last week. It was a brownfield site—a big joinery company used to be on the site. People are starting to build there, so I hope that the centre of Guildford might see a similar development in the near future.

Caroline Nokes (Romsey and Southampton North) (Ind): I think that you might be a little indulgent, Mr Davies, if this is quite a long intervention. The hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) has spoken about brownfield sites, and my right hon. Friend the Member for Guildford (Anne Milton) mentioned, on my behalf, Romsey brewery. Our big challenge there is that that is the only remaining brownfield site in the centre of Romsey, yet because the developers have started the build, there are no additional powers to force them to build it out. Would the hon. Gentleman like to expand a little on how he sees a future in which levers can be applied to developers where they have the permission and have started the build and where compulsory purchase is not possible, for a wide variety of reasons, including the fact that every time the council comes close to compulsory purchase, the developer simply starts building one more unit? Does the Labour party have any great suggestions on how we might resolve such situations?

Alex Cunningham: I will develop that point later in my speech, but we believe that we could impose penalties in that situation. If developers were failing to develop the land, we could tax the land in a particular way so that they could decide either to pay the tax or to get on with the development.

A Government can take many actions to alleviate the housing crisis, but of course the real answer is to build more genuinely affordable homes. To truly address homelessness of all kinds, we need those affordable homes for people to live in. To enable more young people to buy a house, there needs to be the stock available at a price that they can afford. My researcher, Kerri Prince, lives in Greater London and is saving desperately to buy a house, but she needs £40,000 or £50,000 to put a deposit on a house, so it is almost an impossible task for her.

Anne Milton: Does the hon. Gentleman share my concern that the problem when Government put money into the housing market—to take his example—is that they simply push the price up?

Alex Cunningham: The answer to high prices is to provide more homes and drive the prices down, and our ambition is to do that, and not just for younger people. We need to ensure that older people have adequate housing; it should be designed specifically for them so that it is suitable. We need to build more for the elderly as well.

Unfortunately, it is not as simple as giving developers planning permission, as the right hon. Member for Guildford outlined. We have situations where planning permission has been given and building has begun, but residents in the locality are left with an eyesore of a building site for many months, or even years, due to the project being suspended or halted. There is no requirement for developers to finish the building and bring the project to completion, and there are no deadlines for the building to be completed. She gave lots of examples of developers failing the people they are meant to be providing for.

Caroline Nokes: Does the hon. Gentleman concur that the imperative, therefore, is to have deadlines by which development must not only begin, but be completed? It affects not only residents in the locality but, in many instances, residents who are already living on the site.

Alex Cunningham: I concur with that. We see this tremendous race by developers to acquire potentially lucrative land, yet they might not be equipped or ready to develop it. They might not have the resources or labour to get on with the job. They have complied with the planning permission by starting to build. As the right hon. Member for Guildford said, that could just be an access road. They know that they can simply pause the project indefinitely. This is not how our processes should work. We desperately need that housing for people to live in.

Some developers get their hands on the land and then fail to build even one house within a reasonable timescale. The developers always get what they want but, for many reasons—probably related to their projected sales, income and profit generation—they chose to go at a pace that suits them, not the need for new homes. We believe that councils should be given “use it or lose it” planning powers. They should be able to levy the tax that I mentioned on sites where planning permission has been granted but it has not been built out in a reasonable timeframe, or where the building has begun but been halted for the long term, so the homes do not get built because it is not convenient for the developer to do so.

At the planning permission stage, we could place more stringent timetables on when parts of the development should be delivered. That would result in a minimum number of homes being developed within fixed timescales and would not leave the early inhabitants living on a building site for years on end. I know that major developments can face uncertainty and setbacks, but I
am under no illusion: some developers enter the process in the full knowledge that they will abandon the land for a time, depending on their own needs and processes. For me, that is not on.

Local authorities grant planning permission in good faith, to provide homes for their residents. Some developers may hold up the delivery of the houses for the sake of profit, as prices may have dropped, or they have been unable to increase them as much as they claim they need to. For too long we have tolerated profits for developers being put ahead of housing for the many. We should be much stronger on regulations and the planning system for delivering new affordable homes.

Last week, during a visit to Sheffield, the Minister spoke about a corridor of prefab house building factories across the north of England—a bold and welcome vision—yet it was a shame to hear that most of the £38 million to boost construction went to councils in the south. That seems to be the story with this Government: investment for the south while the north continues to be disregarded and discounted. I hope that the Minister will have tough new measures to announce.

Anne Milton: The hon. Gentleman lives in a very different part of the country from the constituency I live in and serve. He may be interested to hear that we in the south-east, particularly in Guildford, feel that all the money goes to the north of England, particularly the infrastructure money.

Alex Cunningham: That is a fascinating comment. Just look at Crossrail, investment in the Underground or investment in HS2, which is supposed to go to the north—we do not know when it will reach Leeds, never mind the real north, which is Teesside, Durham, Newcastle, Berwick-upon-Tweed and then my homeland of Scotland. When we see Crossrail-type investment in infrastructure in the north, perhaps I will be able to come around to the right hon. Lady’s way of thinking.

I hope that the Minister will announce tough new measures that outline how she thinks we can bring these housing developments to completion within a reasonable timescale. That must include measures to support councils in getting the required level of affordable housing to ease their waiting lists; measures to be firm with developers who are sitting on developments with no completion date in sight; and measures to be tougher during the planning permission process, to give councils the assurances they need to grant the green light.

Our housing and planning systems are long overdue an overhaul. Over the past decade, this Government have failed on housing on all fronts, so it will fall to the next Labour Government, in a few weeks’ time, to deliver the change that is needed.

9.55 am

The Minister for Housing (Ms Esther McVey): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship now, Mr Davies. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Guildford (Anne Milton) on securing this debate on building out extant planning permissions. I thank the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North (Caroline Nokes) for adding her contribution to this important debate.

The right hon. Member for Guildford raised many important points: the shortage of homes, unmet need, future need, green belt protections, and the fact that we need to be building homes of all types—social, council or private, to rent or to purchase—and we, as a Government, agreed with that. We are tenant-blind, because everybody will need a home at some time in their life—of course they do—whatever type of home that is at that time. We know from surveys that 87% of people would rather own than rent, so we know that people ultimately want to own a home, because they feel it gives them security and a stake in society. It is about providing all those homes, with a view to helping people on to the housing ladder.

Anne Milton: Before I entered politics, I worked with social housing providers in inner London for 15 years. I disagree with the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham). I think the right to buy gives people an opportunity. I know more than one person who has been able to build a life and meet many of their dreams and aspirations, because they could buy a home. The problem is not the buying but the fact that another home must be built in its place for people who want to rent. The right to buy inherently gives people an opportunity and allows them to get on in a way that other things do not.

Ms McVey: The right hon. Lady is spot on; people do want to be given the opportunity to buy their home. She is also correct that we need to build more homes, to continue that cycle—to enable people to get on the housing ladder at whatever stage in life it is plausible for them to do so. I say that as someone who has been in every type of tenure.

I remember only too well the opportunity afforded to people who bought their own home in the 1980s and earlier. It worked as well for local councils and the Government as it did for the individual because at that time, when council homes were not necessarily being kept in the condition that they should have been, a person living in a council home could take over the property to maintain it, and bought it at a price that worked for them and for Government; and they then had a home.

As the right hon. Lady said, we need to keep that cycle going so that there are more homes coming forward, and that is what we must continue to do. So many people have said, and continue to say, that the opportunity afford through the right to buy fundamentally changed not only their lives, but those of their children.

Alex Cunningham: The Minister will be as aware as I am of the vast number of homes sold under the right to buy that have ended up in the private rented sector because people have sold them and moved on. Many of those people have ended up back in the rental sector, so vast numbers have not really benefited from the right to buy. The important thing is to have more homes, but the Government have failed over many years to provide new homes for each one that they have sold.

Ms McVey: There are many life stories, and the hon. Gentleman may well be right that sometimes, for whatever reason, people might not have stayed in the home that they bought. People do not know what will happen in their life’s journey. However, for the vast bulk of people who took the opportunity, buying their home was transformational: it meant the security of having the
Anne Milton: I thank the Minister for indulging me, since we have quite a bit of time. I would just like to mention to the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham) that when I was on Reigate and Banstead Borough Council I knew a Conservative councillor whose family had been homeless. He had had an abusive father who used to beat up his mother. His mother bought her flat under the right to buy; they sold it and bought a pub, and that was the making of the family. I could tell many more stories along similar lines. It gave the family an opportunity to come from being homeless to owning their own business, running a pub and giving their children all the benefits that they wanted to. That was why he became a Conservative councillor.

Ms McVey: The right hon. Lady is quite right. So many people have said what a support the right to buy was. That is key for the Conservative party: how do we give people to achieve what they aim for in life, whether that is a home or a business?

When we talk about the number of homes coming forward, we all agree that there have been many decades of not building enough; demand has outstripped supply for many years. In the past year, however, more than 220,000 homes have been built—more than in all but one of the past 31 years. We need to do more, and more is being done—but a significant amount has been done already. We are going in the right direction. The Government are putting another £44 billion into home building.

Alex Cunningham: It is good that more homes are being built, but does the Minister acknowledge that the Government have failed to meet their own targets almost every year?

Ms McVey: What I will say is that we are still on the way to our target of building up to 300,000 homes a year by the mid-2020s. We have been building more; as I said clearly, we built more homes this year than in all but one of the last 31 years. That is key.

We have helped people in various ways. Some 560,000 people have benefited from our Help to Buy scheme, and we are helping 310,000 first-time buyers. We have the highest number of first-time buyers in a decade, and there was an increase of 84% between 2010 and 2018, so we are helping people to get on the housing ladder. Local authority waiting lists went down by about 40% in that time. We are helping people across the board, whether they are on housing waiting lists or whether they want to buy homes, but I agree that there is more to do.

Alex Cunningham: The Minister’s statistics may sound impressive, but does she share my concerns? I live at Chelsea Bridge Wharf when I am in London, and each night I pass all the huge new developments and properties that have been built. Although they have been there for several years, most of the lights are off all night. The properties that the Government boast have been built are not occupied, but owned by overseas developers and others who just want them for their value. That does nothing to put people into properties.

Ms McVey: I cannot agree. I am giving the hon. Gentleman figures that show that waiting lists have come down by 40%, that we have the highest number of first-time buyers in a decade, and that we are supporting people into homes, so I cannot agree with what he says.

We all want sustainable development. We want homes that are fit for the future and future-proof. The hon. Gentleman mentioned that in Sheffield I talked about the fact that the Government are setting up a centre of excellence across the north. Our vision is that the north will be the centre for engineering and modern methods of construction. We will be building homes for people to live in, so the UK can be a global leader in modern methods of construction and in safe homes, technological homes, green homes, modern homes and beautiful homes. That is our goal and ambition; if we achieve it, a mature market will be worth £40 billion a year to this country. That industry will be led from the north, as it needs to be. We selected the north because of the vision that it already has. We need to capitalise on the area that stretches from Liverpool right across to Sheffield. I am glad that the hon. Gentleman shares my vision and view of the opportunities.

On sustainable developments and homes for the future, the Government are paving the way for a green revolution with eco-friendly and affordable homes. We are looking in the round at how to have homes with considerably reduced heating costs, so that they are affordable in every way, but also good for the environment. We need homes that give the people in them value for money, that are good for the environment and that reduce carbon emissions.

Anne Milton: Has the Minister looked—I personally have not—at whether we can do more on building regulations to ensure that we make a positive difference to the impact of housing on the environment?

Ms McVey: That is exactly what we are doing: looking at homes for the future and what we need to do for the future. This is coming into play now.

Caroline Nokes: Does the Minister agree that building eco-homes and homes fit for the future will sometimes take real imagination? It is not just about building regs; it is about looking at ways of developing really imaginative and forward-looking homes that fit into the landscape. We need to provide beautiful homes in a way that does not necessarily plaster our countryside with bricks and mortar, but that uses imaginative building materials, so that they are not only environmentally friendly and cheap to run, but sit well in our landscape.

Ms McVey: That is exactly what we have to do: open up the whole building sector and industry. We continue to have traditionally made homes—the latest figures from 2015 show that 90% are built in that way—but a new market is emerging. The modern methods of construction and different materials that the right hon. Lady refers to are being used in 10% of homes, or about 15,000. How do we develop and expand that industry to give people a choice of where to live?
Some of these homes can be built off-site, using modern methods, in a couple of weeks, and can then be put on-site in a couple of days. That stops the disruption for everyone living close by, which stops some of the opposition to planning permissions and building out, because it is very considerate to everybody living close by. That is key, and it is exactly what we are doing.

The companies coming forward in this area include Urban Splash, up in Manchester, which is engaging in a joint venture with a Japanese company, Sekisui, that is coming over to England. In Speke in Liverpool, there is a new, emerging company called Ideal Modular Homes, and in Yorkshire there is Ilke Homes. This new development is happening, and these new products are coming forward. The Government are getting behind that, and supporting these new and emerging industries, because that is the future of housing in this country. However, housing is all about choice, and that is what we will always push; we will not only back industry, business and creativity but ensure that houses are built and delivered to local neighbourhoods in a considerate way.

Alex Cunningham: It is great that we agree on so much across Parliament as far as housing development is concerned, particularly on the greenhousing issue. I have met developers recently, and I keep pressing them on ground source heat pumps, air source heat pumps, solar and everything else, asking them why on earth are they not starting to adopt these new technologies. They tell me it is because the market is immature, and they cannot get the quality of product that they require, and even if the quality of product was there, they could not get it in the quantity that they require. The Minister talks about encouraging the development of these industries, but what will the Government do to encourage that development, so that these industries have the supply chains that they require?

Ms McVey: There is an element of the developments having to be done at a scale that then brings down cost and adds to affordability. That is what we are addressing through schemes such as the home building fund, through which we are putting £2.5 billion into the sector and providing innovative ways for small and medium-sized enterprises to come forward. We are backing up what we are talking about with significant support from Government.

The right hon. Member for Guildford and the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North talked about brownfield sites. They are key, especially when we consider that possibly 1 million homes could be built on them across the country. Once again, through the home building fund, the Government are putting more than £2 billion into supporting work on brownfield land that is coming forward, which is key.

I go on visits around the country, looking at what is happening with housing. I went to Northstowe, the biggest complete new town since the 1950s. It was built on public brownfield land. We have to make sure that there is a steady supply of brownfield land coming forward, and we must provide support to make sure that people do the remediation work on that land and build on it. They must not only start building on that land, but continue that building until completion.

Anne Milton: There is a site like that in Guildford; the brewery site in Romsey would be another. What will the Government do to make these developers build on them now?

Ms McVey: What we are doing is bringing forward an accelerated planning Green Paper. There will be not just a single solution that ensures that developers build out; there will be an array of solutions, using both carrot and stick approaches. Those methods will be set out in our new Green Paper, which is coming forward.

The right hon. Lady is correct to say that after developers receive planning permission and start building, we need to see the end point. We are working with our strategic partner, Homes England. If we are selling off public land, we will make sure that we divide the plots up, so that we can have small, medium-sized and big builders involved, and can ensure a path to completion, with companies of different sizes building properties with different types of tenure. Those methods will be set out in our new Green Paper, which is coming forward.

We have talked about the number of homes that will be needed in the future. The Chartered Institute of Housing has reported that we need around 340,000 new homes a year to meet unmet need, although KPMG and Shelter project that there will be future demand for a minimum of 250,000 homes per year. That is why we are looking to increase the figure to 300,000 new homes a year by the mid-2020s.

We must ensure that new homes fit in with the demands and wants of local communities. Obviously, we live in a democracy; we have to take everybody’s views into account. We have to make sure that people are happy with what is being built; that is why we brought in the national planning policy framework, and it is vital that we keep such things updated, which will help us as we work towards establishing communities that people want.

We have helped to cut red tape while making it quicker to plan and build new developments of homes that people want. That is how we have managed to increase building rates this year. Furthermore, I am delighted that in the year to June 2019, new build dwelling completions—not permissions, but completions—increased by 8% from the year to June 2018. Indeed, in the year ending June 2019, the planning system granted permission for 375,200 new homes, which is a positive step, so we have planning permissions in the pipeline for the future. That means things are going in the right direction, but we recognise that more needs to be done, and more homes need to be built out.

Anne Milton: I do not want the Minister to give away any surprises from the Conservative manifesto, which I am sure will be brought forward soon, but perhaps she could reassure me that it will have some highlights from the planning Green Paper. I also hope that she will address the point that in Cranleigh, which has to build 1,700 homes by 2032, some 1,600 planning permissions have been given. Perhaps she can give me some insight
into what powers local authorities will be given to ensure that these properties are built, so that local authorities are not penalised when unmet need is looked at.

**Ms McVey:** I am glad that the right hon. Lady did not want me to reveal what is in the manifesto, particularly as I am not writing it, which would make revealing what was in it difficult. She is quite correct that housing is key going forward. How do we ensure that we get the homes we need?

Key measures will obviously include the housing delivery test: what is needed in an area, how do we work towards meeting that need, and how do we get the local plan working in the way that is needed? Also, we will look at the independent review of build-out rates. What is inhibiting development? What is stopping people building out? I have mentioned the answer: it is ensuring that right tenures and types of homes are built, so that there is variation.

**Anne Milton:** In the meantime, permissions have been given, but the homes have not been built and the local authority is penalised. That does not seem to be quite fair, so local authorities urgently need a tool that they can use to ensure that properties for which permissions have been granted are built, or local authorities should not be penalised.

**Ms McVey:** That is where the accelerated planning Green Paper will come in, because it will provide the blueprint to overhaul the planning system to create a simpler, fairer system that works for everyone, from homeowners to small and medium-sized businesses, local communities and housing developers. It will also ensure that people who want to build for themselves have the right to do so.

**Alex Cunningham:** Does the Minister see an opportunity for retrospective powers to be granted to local authorities to tackle the specific problems outlined by the right hon. Member for Guildford?

**Ms McVey:** I am not sure about retrospective powers. We would have to look at their impact, but we could certainly go forward with what we see we need to do.

**Caroline Nokes:** This point is absolutely crucial. I have listened with enthusiasm to the Minister’s comments about the accelerated planning Green Paper, because there is much to welcome there. However, on the retrospective point, the power going forward is pointless when it comes to the Plaza site in Guildford or the brewery site in Romsey. We want something that has been outstanding for the best part of 40 years to be tackled now.

**Ms McVey:** As we look at what is in the local plan, we will ask how we need to build it out. I mentioned that there will be carrots and sticks, but we have to make sure that it is feasible and workable going forward. I agree with the right hon. Lady. How do we build these out and prioritise the brownfield sites before we move on and do other things? What are we doing that will give the council significant strength to ensure that these are built out? Tackling unnecessary delays in planning permission and building out has to be key. She asks about the additional strengths that a council could have to ensure that land is developed and built out. All of those things will be considered in the Green Paper, because we intend to achieve those goals and get homes built. We have started off well.

The housing infrastructure fund of £5.5 billion will ensure that the correct infrastructure is in place and will unlock about 650,000 homes. Marginal viability funding will help people to unlock the land. We will probably need to understand a little more about why some of the brownfield land has not been built out and perhaps help people apply for viability funding. If it is about remediation or infrastructure, we could provide support to make sure it is built.

**Caroline Nokes:** I thank the Minister for giving way again. I want to reassure her that in sites such as the Romsey brewery and that of my right hon. Friend the Member for Guildford, it is not about remediation, infrastructure or any outstanding obstacles; it is about a developer who simply finds it more economically convenient not to build than to build. I am very frustrated that what we are hearing from the Green Paper is that there will be lots of carrots and sticks for future development, but nothing that helps now.

**Ms McVey:** But if those sites have not been developed, they will be. We will speed those up. If they are not built, there can only be a future development. We will look at those sites, understand why they have not been built out, and look at what we need to do to ensure that it happens.

**Anne Milton:** I feel that we are giving the Minister a rather hard time, with only a few people speaking. However, I mentioned in my speech the housing infrastructure bids that Guildford has for the Weyside urban village. Interestingly, it has around 1,000 houses and nobody objects—it is one of the few large sites that nobody objects to. When the bid went in, officials in the Minister’s Department said that it was oven-ready—ready to go—but Woking has got £90 million of HIF money on a scheme that is not ready, so can she perhaps write to me in the days before Parliament is dissolved to let me know whether Guildford is getting the bid and, if not, why not, because the scheme is oven-ready for around 1,000 houses?

**Ms McVey:** I will take that away and look into the scheme to see where it is and I will write to the right hon. Lady with an answer. The HIF is all about unlocking developments and finding the extra funds needed for the infrastructure for a site. As she says, it will unlock 1,000 homes in her area. That is why the money was put aside. It is 1,000 homes in her area, but 650,000 across the country. So far we have not delivered on that, but we have to make sure that we get value for money and that homes are built out in a speedy and safe way. I will write to her on that matter and see where her HIF bid is.

**Alex Cunningham:** It looks as though the Minister is moving towards the idea that we should have retrospective powers for local authorities to ensure that the sites are actually built out. Perhaps we could find a way to compel them to work in partnership with other organisations, such as housing associations, in order to allow them to develop a site if the developers are not prepared to get on with it.
Ms McVey: We are supporting housing in all different ways in order to get the homes we need. As I said, we have done a considerable job so far. How do we work with people? We are not just like the Labour party, which might tell people what to do. We understand that we have to work with the local community, local councils and developers to get the best outcomes for the local area. We do it through consensus, understanding what is needed and providing support. The Government set up the housing infrastructure fund to do just that. We ask where the pinch points are, where the difficulties in developing something out are, and then we ensure that it works successfully. But how do we build on that and analyse what works to take it further?

Alex Cunningham: We have heard examples this morning of sites sitting totally empty for donkeys’ years with nothing happening. People have tried to work with developers in the examples that we have given, but nothing has happened. Surely, eventually, you have to remove the carrot and apply the stick.

Ms McVey: This Government have helped support the building of more homes in the past year than all but one of the past 30 years, so I do not want the hon. Gentleman to paint an untrue picture of what is happening across the country. If we drive across the country, we see significant home building. When I talk about the biggest ever complete new town in Northstowe, with 10,000 homes being built on brownfield public land, we can see it happening. Sites are being built out, working with the local community, and that is what we need to do. Do we need to do more? Yes, and I think we can all agree on that.

How do we make sure that brownfield sites or sites that have planning permission come to fruition and get built? We have been doing that all across the country. I have travelled to Gosport to look at a new significant size building there, partnering with Homes England. I have looked at what is happening in Cambridgeshire and Northstowe. I am looking at a new development in Manchester and bringing back into play what I call unloved land, or we are renovating old buildings. That is exactly what we are doing, but each part of the country wants, and requires, a different type and style of home. We must have solutions for all of them, to ensure that we keep to the character of different areas.

The Government also want to bring back many small and medium-sized businesses. A third were lost in the financial crash of 2007-08. How do we stimulate the marketplace and ensure that we bring those builders back into it, so that the big builders do not dominate? That is key, because we are the party of small businesses, and of innovation and aspiration. We can bring those elements back in by working with our strategic partner, Homes England, which has increased in size considerably and is stretching out across the country. We are looking at how we can subdivide land to bring in new developers, so that they too can get building. Equally, if those developers are from the local area, the local area benefits too, in terms of jobs, the survival of businesses, and understanding the character of an area.

Another key point is how to get the skills and the labour force. That involves working through the industrial strategy, and working with the Department for Education to ensure that we will have a workforce that can build the homes that are needed. We are doing significant work and putting significant funding behind that too.

Anne Milton: It is not quite relevant to the debate, but I am sure that the Minister will agree that the Government’s changes to the apprenticeship system have had a significant impact. I could not agree more that we need a lot more smaller builders. They can now get the apprentices they need and train up the workforce they need by using the apprenticeship levy, 25% of which can be passed on to them by those who pay it.

Ms McVey: The right hon. Lady knows much about that, and I pay tribute to the work that she has done in that sphere, getting the apprenticeship levy and working on high-calibre apprenticeships. Construction provides a wonderful career path and wonderful opportunities in an array of areas. We have put money into construction hubs to support young people, and we have worked with the Construction Industry Training Board on traditional build—although I return to the idea of modern methods of construction and getting young people excited about going into that career. At present, we have an ageing workforce, and we must ensure that young people are coming through.

Caroline Nokes: The Minister is of course right that we must encourage young people into the construction industry, but that takes time. What meetings has she had with the construction industry to discuss how they will manage to fill the gap that there will be in construction when free movement ends, to ensure that the current impressive rate of build will continue?

Ms McVey: The right hon. Lady is correct. I have meetings all the time to discuss that, as I did when I was Secretary of State for Work and Pensions, when I was constantly working on how to support various sectors. She will be pleased to know that the Government have got 3.5 million more people into work—a thousand more people every day since 2010. There are also millions more in apprenticeships, so we have looked at the full flow-through of how we support people.

European citizens who are here, working with us, will remain here. We support them and thank them for the work they have done. Looking forward, how can we ensure that our workforce is homegrown as well as including those we need for the time being? The right hon. Lady is correct to mention those issues, but I have not just thought about them today; I have been working on them for nine years. That is why our country has such robust employment figures. However, she is right to mention those concerns.

Alex Cunningham: Unemployment in the north-east is up by 15,000 in the last year, which just shows the imbalance in Government investment. The Minister managed to answer a previous intervention that I had planned before I could make it, but I am interested in what she said about how much we can agree on regarding bringing small builders back into the industry. We have heard about other sites this morning. There are sites across the country that are not being built out, so surely there is an opportunity for small builders to work in partnership with larger companies. Alternatively, larger companies could release the parts of those sites that...
they are not prepared to develop, in order to let small builders enter the market, build homes and satisfy the housing crisis.

Ms McVey: The hon. Gentleman knows that I will not let an unfair representation of what is happening in employment go unchecked. We are at record low unemployment in this country, and at record high employment. The Government have brought down youth unemployment by 50%—under the previous Labour Government it sky-rocketed. We are the ones who ensure that people are in employment and have the careers they want, as well as opportunities for their future, and we will continue to do so.

It has been hard work for the Government to turn around the economy and get people into employment. That is the truth, and it has to be on record. I am particularly pleased that the Government have reduced youth unemployment by 50%. When we started in 2010, meeting young people who thought that they might never get a job was shameful, yet we have turned that around, ensuring that there are opportunities for everyone in this country.

With regard to ensuring that people work together, including big companies giving work to smaller companies, people do that on site anyway, ensuring that small, local companies work on site. That needs to be pushed even further. We are working with our strategic partner, Homes England, to ensure not just that there is a single big developer, but that the land is subdivided so that small and medium-sized enterprises can come forward. I am also working closely with Homes England on ensuring that smaller sites are given to SMEs to build on first.

We agree that it is key that local people benefit from the house building that is needed, not only through places to live, but through jobs. Some 300,000 homes will have to be built every year from the mid-2020s. Look at the size of the opportunities, and at the workforce that needs to be created. They will be very good jobs with very good career prospects. That needs to be planned for, which goes back to the question the right hon. Member for Romsey and Southampton North asked about the workforce. Significant planning needs to go into that, which has been done and continues to be done. Again, that is why we are looking at modern methods, so that we can cater for a highly skilled workforce.

I think that we are coming to the end of the debate. We have covered an array of issues. I will take various matters back and will write to the right hon. Member for Guildford, particularly on the HIF fund that she is working for. However, I want people to be reassured that we are building more homes, and we will continue to do so. We have incentives and support to ensure that people are building on brownfield sites, and where they are not, we will look at what levers we can pull to make sure that people build out those sites, whether using carrots or sticks. I will take that question back and consider it. We are also talking about how we make the planning process easier, making sure that we are working with local communities.

I will give the final word to the right hon. Member for Guildford.

Anne Milton: I thank the Minister, who has been very patient. Having been a Minister, I know that debates are generally more difficult when there are lots of Members present, but it is also quite tricky when there are only two Back Benchers contributing.

The key point is that we want to protect our green belt, but that does not mean simply pushing housing on to the countryside beyond the green belt, which is the case in Cranleigh. It is not sustainable; it is not the right place to build homes. All these planning permissions are being given but the homes are not being built, and unless something happens soon, Waverley Borough Council will be penalised for that.

I appreciate that the Minister is going to be bringing forward a Green Paper, but I, like many members of the public, get so frustrated: “A Green Paper? Goodness gracious me, when is something actually going to happen?” It feels like a long way ahead, so I urge the Minister to look at some small things that could be done. I know that the housing market is complex, and that Governments have to be careful about where they interfere in it because that can have unintended consequences, but council tax on undeveloped planning permissions is one small thing that might alter the balance of the economics for developers, and get them building.

There is another thing I urge the Minister to do. Governments always talk about joined-up working, but they never join anything up. That is not a criticism of the Minister, but she and her colleagues in the Department for Transport need to work closely together, because in an area such as Guildford—I am sure this is the case in Romsey, too—we have to get transport and housing lined up.

Ms McVey: I can reassure the right hon. Lady that we have set up an inter-ministerial group. She is quite right that we should not, and do not, work in silos. All of these things need to be aligned so that we are getting the transport and the infrastructure, and homes are built in the right place. We are doing that, and making sure there is a timetable and a clear path for the transport and homes needed in communities such as hers.

Anne Milton: Turning an inter-ministerial group into actual action can be quite a frustrating business, but it is a start. I would also include the Treasury in that. The Treasury looks only at income, but it is quite important that it also takes account of the social benefits of certain things it does. If that were put into the mix, the Treasury would look at its figures in a different way, because there is a clear social benefit.

I thank you, Mr Davies, for your patience, and I thank the Minister and the hon. Member for Stockton North (Alex Cunningham). I look forward to receiving the Minister’s letter about the HIF bid within the next couple of days.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered building out extant planning permissions.
Leaving the EU: Integrated Foreign Policy

11 am

Mr Bob Seely (Isle of Wight) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered integrated foreign policy after the UK leaves the EU.

As ever, it is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Davies. I am grateful to the Minister for attending; I am aware that he is newish to his brief, so I hope he is not too put out. I also hope that we can use the debate not only to set out ideas, but to explore some themes and thoughts that I hope will be of benefit to global Britain post Brexit.

Integration should be a key theme in foreign and overseas policy, because it is a natural way to increase our power. It is good to have more power, which we hope to use for our own good and for the defence of the international liberal order. Having power also prevents others from shaping the world to our detriment. All powers need to integrate, and arguably the problem at the moment is that our potential adversaries are doing rather better than we are. Indeed, the commonly used term “hybrid war” is in part a reference to permanent and hostile competition using not only conventional tools of military force, but non-conventional forms of state power. One of the things that worries me about the new world is that, arguably, modern autocracies have adjusted to it rather better than we have.

More broadly, Brexit—if it happens—requires a renewed commitment to global engagement. It should not imply a shrinking from the world, but an embrace of it. I want the Government’s vision of global Britain to have meaning. James Rogers from the Henry Jackson Society and I produced a study entitled, “Global Britain: A Twenty-First Century Vision”. The foreword was written by the current Prime Minister, who I hope appreciated some of the ideas—I am not saying that he would recommend them all, because we were trying to suggest some quite radical thinking. Perhaps there are hon. Members present who would question that, and they are welcome to do so.

Harriett Baldwin (West Worcestershire) (Con): My hon. Friend is making some very wise points. When I was a Minister, I was certainly impressed with the integration that we see in post. I appreciate that he applied for the debate before the general election was announced, but is he as shocked as I am to see that there is not a single Labour Member present to discuss this crucial issue?

Mr Seely: It is disappointing that they are not here, but we have a former Labour Member, the hon. Member for Penistone and Stocksbridge (Angela Smith), as well as an esteemed Democratic Unionist Member, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon). There is at least some cross-party interest.

What is the UK’s status in the world? The 21st century is likely to be defined by two superpowers: China and the United States.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): On the point made in the intervention, it is not normal for a shadow Minister to respond in a half-hour debate.

Mr Seely: Thank you for that point, Chair.

A series of major powers will sit alongside the two superpowers: Brazil, Indonesia, economic powerhouses such as Germany and Japan, and former superpowers such as Britain and France. Britain is not a superpower and has not been since the 1950s, but it remains a great power—perhaps the foremost great power. Talk of the UK as medium-sized and middle-ranking is pointlessly deprecating and contributes little to the debate.

What is the state of the world? Conventional wars are generally in decline, and much of humanity enjoys more enriched lives than ever before.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): The hon. Gentleman has brought a very important issue to Westminster Hall for the half-hour debate. Does he agree that it is important for the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland to be a member of NATO and to play its part in that excellent organisation when it comes to foreign policy that collectively joins us together to have a global influence?

Mr Seely: It is critical. One of the points that I would like to touch on in the debate is the importance of the UK’s engaging multilaterally through not only, hopefully, a leading role in NATO, but a re-energised role in the United Nations. If I have time, I would like to ask the Minister about that.

What is the state of the world? Conventional war is in decline, but the world is becoming a more challenging place. There are new forms of integrated conflict and competition being developed by rivals. The international rules-based system set up since world war two has not broken down, but it is under threat and is being bent in several different directions.

A global Britain implies the use of something that perhaps we have not had enough of in this country—strategy, which is the reconciling of ends, ways and means. For the UK to be better able to achieve its ends, it has to marshal its means and ways—its resources, and how it uses them in the most effective way possible. Hence the need for integration across Government Departments, in a strategy that includes all overseas Government Departments and perhaps sometimes domestic Departments, too.

Russia and China do not have foreign policies that we should copy, but they show the worth of integrating power. Does Britain have what the great 20th-century strategist Basil Liddell Hart would call a “grand strategy”—the combination of the great tools of state power? I would argue that we do not yet have that—the Minister might disagree—but we are working towards it. We do not have it yet because, apart from anything else, although Sir Simon McDonald, the permanent under-secretary at the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, pledged to the Foreign Affairs Committee to produce “something” in early 2019, I am not aware that the work has yet been produced. What has happened to that report that was promised to the Foreign Affairs Committee?

The tools of national power and influence exist on a spectrum, ranging from hard power through to soft power. As I have argued, they should not be seen in isolation from each other. British state power sometimes becomes less than the sum of its parts because our overseas engagement has come to be divided between so many competing Departments.
I will now make a point with which some colleagues may disagree. For me, there is no reason why we should not look closely at the Australian and Canadian models, whereby overseas aid and trade Departments are integrated as agencies within the Foreign Office.

Angela Smith (Penistone and Stocksbridge) (LD): Evidence suggests quite strongly that the Australian decision has had a significant impact on the Government’s ability to deliver effective aid overseas; in other words, aid has lost out.

Mr Seely: That is not the evidence that I have read, but I look forward to reading it. If the hon. Lady would care to send it to me, I would love to have a look at it. From my conversations with Australian and Canadian diplomats and people who know about these things, I understand that their system—the integration of trade and the international development into their Foreign Offices—has actually worked quite well. This is not a criticism of DFID, which does many things very well. It spends public money considerably better than the Foreign Office does. It is not about trashing or diluting DFID, but about its full integration into an integrated overseas policy. I am also not arguing against 0.7% of national income being spent on aid, but I would change its definition.

Mr Andrew Mitchell (Sutton Coldfield) (Con): My hon. Friend and I have a difference of opinion on this matter. Let me be very clear: no one who has studied these things closely thinks that the Canadian and Australian model that he describes is superior to the British model. I can reassure him on this point. When David Cameron set up the National Security Council in 2010, he did so directly to address the point that my hon. Friend makes. The National Security Council provides for the co-ordination between defence, diplomacy and development. With the greatest of respect, that makes my hon. Friend’s proposal to put those Departments back into the Foreign Office entirely redundant, because the new mechanism delivers precisely the goal that he and I want to see—better co-ordination of policy in Government.

Mr Seely: I am not sure whether that is the case, but I will explore that idea in a few minutes if I have time.

Mark Garnier (Wyre Forest) (Con): My hon. Friend makes a very good point, and I will leave it to my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) to argue whether the National Security Council is superior to the Foreign Office. I go along with the latter, but I think it important to note that it is an option that we should explore, and we should look honestly at whether it is the best, but if it is not—I suspect the Minister will argue that—I would very much like to explore ways to increase joint working, because it works at a strategy level.

I take issue with what my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield (Mr Mitchell) said about the National Security Council, because I am not sure it works as well as it could when it comes to setting strategy. We need a national strategy council because the National Security Council’s role is still too reactive. It is moving towards integration and looking at strategy, which I will come to if I do not run out of time—I want to make sure the Minister has time to respond.

There are many different ways of doing this, but at a departmental level, the integration to achieve greater effect and greater power sometimes breaks down. Arguably, it can also break down at an ambassadorial level; I will develop that argument in a second. I thank my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield and my hon. Friend the Member for Wyre Forest (Mark Garnier) for their interventions and their important contributions to the debate, which I take in good faith.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): Does my hon. Friend agree that one of the problems that we face in integration and influence is that our senior leaders travel far too little in places of importance, such as the whole of the African continent? In the time in which President Macron has visited the African continent more than 10 times, our Prime Minister has been able to visit only once. It was the first time a Prime Minister has visited Kenya—one of our strongest allies—since the days of Margaret Thatcher.

Mr Seely: My hon. Friend makes a very good point, and I would love to see Ministers do that more—I hope the Minister will not then blame me for jetlag if he ever has it. That is an absolutely sensible point. I will crack on, because I do not want to run out of time.

We have a tendency towards reactivity. We have a National Security Council, as my right hon. Friend the Member for Sutton Coldfield articulates. We have an Africa strategy, and we are developing a China strategy, so we are integrating more, but I would argue that we need to turbocharge it, push it and institutionalise it to greater effect. One way to do that is to change the nature of the National Security Council and turn it into a national strategy council. It would have two roles: it would have the reactive role that it has at the moment, and it would institutionalise and formalise a strategy role to set up whole-Government policy towards different parts of the world. That is beginning to happen; the National Security Council has within it committees that look at different parts of the world and themes. However, for me it is not institutionalised enough. There has been a lack of political leadership, as there often is nowadays—this relates to the point that my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) made about travel—to integrate Departments so that we maximise the value of our power.

Mr Mitchell: What my hon. Friend is saying about strategy is very good, but the National Security Council tends, to a very large extent, to be the creature of the Prime Minister. All I can tell him is that, when David
Cameron was Prime Minister, the point that he makes about strategy was understood, and perhaps pursued more than it is today.

Mr Seely: I thank my right hon. Friend for that intervention and for being present; it is a great privilege for me that he is. He makes the point well about the need to normalise and institutionalise the strategy element so that, regardless of the Prime Minister’s determination to push through a strategy, the setting of strategy five, 10 or 20 years ahead becomes the norm. The Army does it when it looks at strategic threats out to 2045—I was listening to the Commandant General of the Royal Marines yesterday—but we are not doing it at a political level. I am worried that our excellent FCO diplomats and soldiers lack political leadership because we have become too parochial in this House. It is a pleasure that so many Members with a broader vision are in the Chamber. I will crack on, because I am about to run out of time.

Here are some ideas for the One HMG agenda. I want it to remove barriers to joint working so that, whatever system we have—whether or not we keep DFID and DIT, and whatever their relationship with the FCO is—we maximise the integration factor. I was painfully aware of some of these ideas when I was overseas and deployed in my former life as a very accidental soldier. We need clear, integrated governance structures. We need integration of more levels of Departments, potentially through the use of what I call joint effects teams. I have seen their worth, and their absence in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq.

We need integrated line management through ambassadors. Ambassadors cannot manage DFID staff in the same way as they can with the FCO. An ambassador in a country should have control over the whole staff. There should be a common set of pay and conditions, which, frankly, means giving the FCO staff pay rises to bring them in line with other Departments and ensure that they are treated in exactly the same way.

Critically—especially for military operations in which the military are in the lead but DFID is very well represented and other international agencies fall under the British chain of command—there should be a single legal chain to speed decision making. Among the many things that slowed down decision making in provincial reconstruction teams in places such as Afghanistan and Iraq were the multiple legal chains that stretched back to individual Departments. If DFID is leading an operation in Africa and other Departments are supporting, DFID should supply the legal chain and there should not be parallel legal chains elsewhere. If the military are leading and DFID is supporting, the military lawyers should likewise have the legal remit. That speeds decision making and gives clearer and firmer political direction without too much infighting. That is an example of integration at a practical level that does not require great structural changes—I still want to see them, but I accept that they may not happen.

I would like to see the UK push for significant reform to DAC, the OECD committee. To colleagues who think that I am hostile to DFID, let me say that I am genuinely not, and I am genuinely not hostile to 0.7%.

Some people in this House, like Nigel Farage outside it, say, “We should pretty much scrap it. It is a disgrace that we spend more on overseas aid than on policing.” Actually, that is an embarrassing figure for us. I am not against the 0.7% figure at all, but we need to change the definition in some way that helps us. I suggest 0.5%, with 0.2% that we spend how we like, without reference to DAC. We could do two things in particular. All UK peacekeeping should come out of development money, because it is a fundamental building block to development. That would save the Ministry of Defence £300 or £400 million a year.

Harriett Baldwin: Does my hon. Friend welcome the fact that we were successful in lobbying the OECD DAC to ensure that peacekeeping should go from 7% to 15%?

Mr Seely: Yes, and I congratulate the former Minister on her excellent work and that of the Department. We can spend 15% now, but there is a big difference between 15% and 100%. I would like to see all UK peacekeeping counted, either by changing the rules of DAC or rearranging how we spend our aid money.

The second thing I would like to see is a reinvigorated BBC World Service TV and radio, with significantly increased funding, and I would like that to come under aid and development. Increasingly, aid and development will be seen not just as keeping people alive, as important as that is—I would not touch, but increase the life-saving element of DFID’s budget. However, I would reallocate some of the economic support, where there is no discernible evidence of its effectiveness, either to the BBC World Service so that it can take on global fake news, or peacekeeping.

Mr Mitchell: My hon. Friend makes a very good point about the BBC World Service. In fact, when I was Secretary of State, I increased by nine times the amount of money spent on the BBC World Service Trust. On the OECD DAC, if we make a promise to the poorest people in the world—Archbishop Tutu described that as a sacred thing—we should stick to it. The promise was 0.7%, and I am very proud that a Conservative Government introduced it. My hon. Friend is perfectly right to say that we should always review the nature of the definition. What he says about Britain’s peacekeeping effort is absolutely relevant, but the OECD DAC works very well for Britain, because it brings countries that do not spend their aid as effectively as we do up to the standard that Britain expects, so we gain from that.

Geraint Davies (in the Chair): Bob Seely, you have 10 minutes left.

Mr Seely: I will wrap up in the next minute because I want to give the Minister time to respond. I do not accept that final point, because so few countries spend anything like the same amount on aid, and I think it just washes over most states. There is clearly a conversation to be had there.

To sum up, we have a National Security Council, we have had changes to increase integration and we should have three global themes—free trade, free thought and freedom from oppression. We could wrap up so much of what we do by championing free trade under the
WTO, freedom of thought with the BBC, and freedom from oppression, by championing UK anti-slavery measures at the UN and in this place. All that implies a commitment to a renewed multilateralism, not only through NATO, as the hon. Member for Strangford pointed out, but through the UN. I would very much support a much more powerful role for the UK in the UN, both in committing more resources, funding and support for its reform, and in being a critical UN power. That will also mean giving the UK’s UN team a better building to work in, so that they become more of a hub for the diplomatic community at the UN, increasing our power and influence.

Although I had other points to make, I will leave it there because I want to give the Minister time to respond. I thank him for listening and look forward to his response.

11.20 am

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Christopher Pincher): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight (Mr Seely) on securing this timely debate. I mean “timely” in the broader sense, as we are nearly out of time in this Parliament, but I am sure that the ideas that he adumbrated will form part of the election campaign, in which parties and candidates of all stripes will be able to put forward their views on our foreign policy—views that may well be taken up by the next Government. I pay tribute to him for all that he has done to inform and challenge the Government’s foreign policy making, both as a member of the Select Committee on Foreign Affairs and through his thoughtful contributions in print, of which I have two submissions to hand. I also congratulate all colleagues who are present. As my hon. Friend the Member for West Worcestershire (Harriett Baldwin) said, not every political party is represented, but those who are here are respected across the House.

There is no doubt that we face a world of increasing uncertainty. The rules-based international system is under challenge. Trading tensions, climate change and growing populations mean greater competition. New technologies need to be properly harnessed to ensure that cyberspace cannot be hijacked for malign purposes—my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight made that point cogently and eloquently. Those challenges involve threats to our interests that we need to identify and overcome, but they also offer opportunity, from the economic potential of innovating to tackle climate change to the commercial possibilities offered by the dynamic economies of Asia, or the growing populations of Africa.

My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) mentioned Africa, and I agree with him: Ministers should travel more. I draw his attention to the current rather challenging parliamentary arithmetic, which means that the most powerful person in the House of Commons is not the Prime Minister, the Chancellor of the Exchequer or the Foreign Secretary, but the Government pairing Whip, who allows us to travel. Perhaps in a new Parliament with a different arithmetic, Ministers will be able to travel much more.

Jeremy Lefroy: Does the fact that British foreign policy suffers because Ministers are understandably tied to Parliament not point to a fundamental problem in our country? We do not have the ability to get out there, unlike our counterparts with presidential systems.

Christopher Pincher: Our system is beautiful but imperfect. I acknowledge my hon. Friend’s point, but we have a fantastic diplomatic service, Members of the House of Lords, who are often able to travel more, and trade envoys from across political parties, who contribute to our diplomatic effort.

Once we have left the European Union, we will continue to be guided by our core foreign policy priorities: protecting our people, projecting our influence and promoting our prosperity. Those priorities align with the three freedoms mentioned by my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight: freedom from oppression, freedom of thought and expression, and freedom for trade. I am sure he will agree that those are important elements in delivering our core priorities.

We will remain a pragmatic champion of our values, a steadfast defender of our interests, and a global force for good. We will work with, and through, the global network of multilateral institutions—as a permanent member of the United Nations, to which my hon. Friend referred; as a leading member of the G7, the G20 and the Commonwealth; and as an independent reformist voice in the World Trade Organisation. That commitment extends to our neighbours in Europe. We are leaving the EU, but we are not leaving Europe. We remain steadfastly committed to the security and welfare of the continent, remaining a vital partner in the Organisation for Security and Co-operation in Europe, the Council of Europe, and of course, NATO, as the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and others mentioned. We will lead by example. The Foreign Secretary has announced our intention to establish a global human rights sanctions regime, which will reinforce Britain’s role in the world as a good global citizen.

I had a good sense of the points that my hon. Friend the Member for Isle of Wight would raise today from the report he produced in February. He referred to the Prime Minister’s foreword to it, and it will form an important part of my respite reading during the general election campaign. If I am here on the other side of the election and appear before the Foreign Affairs Committee, of which I trust he will be a member, I am sure that we will refer to the report when we jost.

I am pleased to advise my hon. Friend that many of the suggestions made in the report, and by hon. Members today, mirror lines of work that this Government are already delivering. The United Kingdom has considerable strengths and world-leading capabilities, including a renowned military, of which he was once a part, an attractive economy and one of the largest and most respected diplomatic, development and security networks. Our extraordinary soft power generates a huge amount of opportunity and puts us in the top two of Portland’s soft power index. To leverage those assets to maximum effect, we must work across organisational boundaries. If global Britain is to be successful, our systems must be fit for purpose.

I agree with my hon. Friend. That a well-integrated foreign policy is critical. He mentioned the National Security Council, which has proven an excellent vehicle for bringing together the work of different Departments to focus on the more immediate issues and threats that under our allies face. This was endorsed over the last year by the adoption of the fusion doctrine, which strengthens Her Majesty’s Government’s collective approach to national security, drawing together all the
United Kingdom’s security, economic and diplomatic capabilities in pursuit of our national interests. Members of the NSC, be they Cabinet Ministers, junior Ministers, officials or experts, speak with authority and as equals. That is one of the key components of the NSC’s success.

Of course, there is always room for improvement. That is why at home, the Government’s collective approach to international work is strengthened through the creation of national strategy implementation groups, which meet monthly and bring together officials from all relevant Government Departments to formulate collective responses to opportunities and challenges. We encourage effective co-ordination between Departments, but there is also a great deal to be gained from the development of dedicated expertise in specialist departments. I will ask my officials, who my hon. Friend is meeting later, to give him further detail on that.

I thank my hon. Friend for securing this debate. I appreciate that a 30-minute debate on the integration of foreign policy is hardly enough to integrate it, but I am sure that there will be future opportunities for him, me and other hon. Members to debate it more fully.

Question put and agreed to.

11.30 am

Sitting suspended.
national minimum wage. Now, we must do a lot more. Also, child poverty is not restricted to deprived areas. My constituency is seen as quite affluent, but in some parts of it, more than a third of children are being brought up in poverty. This is an issue for us all, in every single community, and the way to tackle it is to improve working conditions and pay in the workplace.

Hugh Gaffney: I could not agree more. People used to think they were working to get out of poverty—not so nowadays. The figures highlight the fact that we have a real crisis with child poverty in Scotland. The Resolution Foundation has projected that child poverty across Scotland will likely rise to 30% by the mid-2020s, despite the target to reduce child poverty to 18%.

Dr Philippa Whitford (Central Ayrshire) (SNP): One in four children in Scotland lives in poverty, but is not the real shocker that the figure is the lowest of those for the four UK nations? Child poverty was down at 21%, but has now risen, not because of the financial crash but, as the hon. Member for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) said, because of changes in welfare. The rise started in 2012, and that was owing to policies made here in Westminster.

Hugh Gaffney: We are all here to help the children, whether in Scotland, England, Wales or Northern Ireland. That is what it is all about.

Chris Stephens (Glasgow South West) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing the debate. Is not one of the biggest reasons for children going into poverty the two-child limit on tax credits? Does he agree with the Select Committee on Work and Pensions, which is to publish a report before Dissolution that says that the policy should be scrapped?

Hugh Gaffney: Yes. I will come on to two-child cap poverty.

History shows that we can tackle child poverty in Scotland. The largest falls in the poverty rate recorded in the past 20 years were among pensioners and children. From the late 1990s, child poverty across Scotland fell significantly because of the policy choices made by the Labour Government. The Labour Government redesigned the welfare state with the purpose of tackling child poverty, which is why policies like child tax credits and the national minimum wage were introduced. Those policies were designed to target the underlying causes of child poverty, such as low pay. The success of the Labour Government in reducing child poverty highlights the fact that it can be done when there is the political will and the right policies.

We need to show that political will, because the impact of poverty on children is simply unacceptable. Children living in poverty suffer greater health and social outcomes than their better-off peers. Children living in poverty are much more likely to suffer health problems, such as poor mental health and well-being, and obesity. They are more likely to lag behind in reading, writing and numeracy. Child poverty affects not just childhood, but individuals throughout their whole life.

Dr Whitford: I thank the hon. Gentleman for giving way again. One of the most shocking figures that I have heard in my time in Parliament was through the all-party group on health in all policies. We heard from the UK Faculty of Public Health that 1,400 children a year die before they reach the age of 15 as a direct result of poverty. As he has said, those who do not may still face blighted lives thereafter.

Hugh Gaffney: I thank the hon. Lady for that staggering fact. How sad is it that, in this day and age, children are dying from poverty before they are 15?

If we are to tackle child poverty in Scotland, we must look at whether current policies help us to do so. Since 2010, the Government have implemented a series of welfare reforms, such as universal credit. As we all know from our surgeries and constituents, universal credit is having a negative impact on families. In particular, it is hurting low-income families, pushing more children into poverty. Universal credit could be considered a success only if its aims were to push up rent arrears, increase food bank use and drive people deeper into poverty. That is the success that some think universal credit is creating.

Earlier this year, I led an Adjournment debate on food poverty in Scotland, after it was revealed that more than 210,000 food parcels had been distributed by the Trussell Trust last year. Nearly 70,000 of those food parcels were issued to children. That means that about one in three food parcels distributed in Scotland last year was for a child. What a shameful situation we are in. The UK is meant to be the world’s fifth largest economy, but we have children going hungry in our constituencies.

Rising food bank use is linked directly to the Government’s welfare reforms. Trussell Trust figures reveal that almost 50% of all food bank referrals are the result of a delay to benefit payments to claimants. Almost 35% of all emergency food supplies are distributed to those individuals who find that their benefits regularly fail to cover their cost of living. In areas where universal credit has already been rolled out, the Trussell Trust observed a 30% increase in food bank use after a year of the roll-out.

Chris Stephens: I recall the hon. Gentleman’s Adjournment debate on food poverty. Does he agree that one of the main issues is that people wait five weeks to get their benefit entitlement? The advanced payment really should be the first payment, and people should not have to wait five weeks to get state support.

Hugh Gaffney: I totally agree. That is a change we can make today.

The Government decided to implement a two-child limit policy, despite warnings from this House and charities that it would worsen child poverty in Scotland. What was warned about has come to pass, and almost 4,000 low-income families in Scotland are affected, with a loss of £3,000 per year for each family. We cannot ignore the impact of other welfare reforms introduced by the Government. The benefit cap affects over 3,000 households in Scotland, 92% of which contain children. The benefits freeze has impacted low-income families, further fuelling child poverty across Scotland.

It would be fair to say that the Government’s welfare reforms have worsened the child poverty rate in Scotland, but we cannot ignore the fact that the Scottish Government have gained greater powers, which would enable them to better address child poverty. The Joseph Rowntree
[Hugh Gaffney]

Foundation highlights that in areas of Scotland such as Edinburgh, where the private rent sector is bigger than the social sector, private rent growth has outstripped inflation over the last decade. Higher rents impact on the incomes of families, meaning that they are less able to cover essential costs such as food and heating. Undoubtedly, that fuels child poverty across Scotland.

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman will know that 16% of benefits have been devolved to Scotland. He says that the Scottish Government should do more; what does he think the Scottish Government should do that they are not currently doing?

Hugh Gaffney: The Scottish Government should use more of their powers to help children. They have the powers; we are asking them to use them. The Scottish Government’s own figures reveal that there was a 4% increase in the number of children living in temporary accommodation last year. Nearly 7,000 children now live in temporary accommodation in Scotland, and last year, 38 children were made homeless every day. It is clear that the failure to provide permanent, high-quality accommodation for children is increasing child poverty across Scotland.

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): Does the hon. Gentleman realise that the Scottish Government have built more houses since they came to power in 2007 than the Labour-Liberal Democrat Administration did in the preceding years of the Scottish Parliament?

Hugh Gaffney: Are those houses social housing? Are those houses council housing?

Although the Scottish Government have introduced a £10-per-week child support payment, it will not be fully in place until 2022. My good friend Mark Griffin MSP highlighted that nearly 60,000 children will lose out on the child support payment because initial applications will be restricted to children who are five and under. How will such a restriction truly help to tackle child poverty across Scotland? We need real policy changes that will eradicate child poverty in Scotland. We must scrap universal credit, because it has absolutely failed to address child poverty.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the hon. Gentleman again for being generous with his time. We are all on the same side; we all believe that child poverty is bad, and we all want to do whatever needs to be done to eradicate it. Again, 16% of benefit powers are devolved to Scotland. He talks about policy changes; what specific policy changes does he want in Scotland that we have the power to deliver but have not yet delivered?

Hugh Gaffney: I said at the beginning that we are here to get the right policies. I want the right policies in the Scottish Government.

The Government should end the five-week wait that claimants must go through, as the hon. Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) said, before they receive their initial universal credit payment. I was also concerned to hear that the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions refused to rule out a further extension of the benefits freeze. I urge the Government to bring the benefits freeze to an immediate end, rather than looking at extending it. An extension of the benefits freeze means an extension of child poverty across Scotland. I urge the Government to end the benefit cap and the two-child limit policy.

Ahead of this debate, the House’s digital engagement team undertook a public engagement exercise and received over 700 responses. Respondents called on the Government to look again at their damaging welfare reforms such as universal credit. I hope that the Government will reflect on that.

The Scottish Government must also look at the policy changes that they could make. They could introduce a Mary Barbour law to cap rents in the private rented sector, in order to help low-income families. They could build more social and affordable housing to end the disgrace of children being trapped in temporary accommodation, or finding themselves homeless. They could look again at the child support payment, which the Resolution Foundation found would still leave more than 25% of children in Scotland living in poverty—the Scottish Government’s own target of 18% would not be close to being met. I also urge them to listen to the calls of Scottish Labour for a child benefit top-up of £5 per week to support those affected by the two-child limit policy.

I started this debate by saying that all of us in this House share the goal of eradicating child poverty in Scotland. That goal will be achieved only through serious policy change of the kind that I have suggested today. I put on record my support for North Lanarkshire Council’s Club365 programme, which helps to tackle holiday hunger among children in my constituency. That shows that local councils can take action to address child poverty, despite the budget cuts imposed on them by central Government.

Former Prime Minister Gordon Brown was right to say that Scotland now has a full-blown child poverty emergency. In emergencies, we expect rapid and decisive action. I hope we will see that action from both the UK and Scottish Governments.

2.47 pm

Marion Fellows (Motherwell and Wishaw) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate my parliamentary neighbour, the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), on this debate.

Let me begin by quoting a community activist in my constituency, Derek Kelter:

“Poverty destroys everything in your life. A low for me was last Christmas, when I had no money to buy my son a Christmas present. The situation we have today is unacceptable. We should all be able to live a dignified life but too many people are trapped in poverty. I’m blind and I’ve been locked out of employment since I had a brain injury five years ago. It doesn’t have to be this way though. Social security benefits should be enough so that people can live a dignified life and disabled people should be given support to access employment.”

We can call agree that that is a damning indictment on the state of a 21st-century first-world country. It is appalling.
I am not here to blame people, but to represent the people of Motherwell and Wishaw and to fight for the best possible life for them. That evidence was given to the Poverty Alliance. The Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland also has damning indictments of child poverty in Scotland. However, it noted the introduction of the Scottish child payment by the Scottish Parliament in 2020, which will start at £10 a week for each child, no matter how many children are in the family. In Scotland, we do not believe that families should be penalised by a two-child cap; that is an abomination. It is almost incredible that the Tory Government in Westminster have tried time and again to justify that cruel, callous policy.

I agree with much of what the hon. Gentleman said. We are all against child poverty. I, too, would like the Scottish Government to eradicate it tomorrow. That will not happen while they do not have the levers of all the tax and benefit systems that the UK Government currently have reserved to them. However, in the circumstances, the Scottish Government continue to do what they can with the limited resources they have.

The hon. Gentleman says that Labour has pledged to scrap universal credit, but the Joseph Rowntree Foundation does not necessarily agree that that is the best way forward. Introducing two separate types of benefit payments would further confuse people, and more people would probably fall between the cracks with two benefit systems. We all know what is wrong with universal credit. We have said time and again, in this Chamber and the main Chamber, that we should look at making it work for those who have to use it.

Many people in my constituency are reliant on universal credit, and it is the single biggest casework issue I deal with. This Government should end the five-week wait. The five-week wait should be a thing of the past. The fact that people have to repay advances at an enormous rate leaves them even poorer and means they have to use food banks even more. I should pay credit to the Lanarkshire food bank, which operates in my constituency; it is a source of real help to many in Motherwell and Wishaw.

Labour actually has a good list of things it wants to do, most of which are based on things the Scottish Government have already asked for and introduced. I agree with the hon. Gentleman that we should have fortnightly payments and split payments for couples. That should be the default position. My hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) has made that point in numerous debates.

I also think this UK Tory Government are wrong to charge single parents to apply to the Child Maintenance Service: again, I have debated that many times with the Minister. Notwithstanding years of austerity in the United Kingdom, it seems that this Tory regime want to make people who are poor even poorer, by charging them more and more for services that their children need.

The UN special rapporteur on extreme poverty and human rights—someone from whom the Minister normally would not like to hear—praised the Scottish Government for their “ambitious schemes for addressing poverty, including the Fairer Scotland Action Plan and the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan”, and for using their “newly devolved powers to establish a promising social security system, guided by the principles of dignity” and respect. I believe that is another thing the Labour party wants to introduce.

We have good ideas in Scotland for ending child poverty. We actually have a plan to do it. We measure child poverty. It gives us no comfort that child poverty increases under the watch of a UK Tory Government who say they are absolutely committed to ending austerity but show no sign of doing so.

I do not want to stand here and quote stats—we can all do that—but when a constituent of mine gets to his lowest ebb because he cannot find the money to buy his child a Christmas present, there is something seriously wrong with the state of this United Kingdom. As far as I am concerned, the sooner Scotland exercises its right and gives the people the choice to leave it, the better.

2.54 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) on bringing forward this debate. He always speaks passionately on behalf of his people, and on this occasion he did so on behalf of all children in poverty.

I am here to support my colleagues and friends. Although the debate is about child poverty in Scotland, the fact is that child poverty is not specific to Scotland. It is also rampant in other areas of the United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland—particularly Northern Ireland—so I want to say a couple of words in support of colleagues who have already spoken and those who will speak after me. Much of what we say will be very similar.

I am a proud Ulster Scot. I love my heritage. I come from the Stewarts of the lowlands of Scotland, so my heritage goes way back to Scotland. I share a cultural identity with the hon. Gentleman and other friends and colleagues in the Chamber, and my values are very similar to theirs.

Unfortunately, the children in my constituency face the same difficulties as those in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency. Official estimates published by the Northern Ireland Department for Communities—the figures are a matter for the Northern Ireland Assembly—show that in 2017-18, 19% of children in Northern Ireland from birth up to the age of 16, including dependent children aged between 16 and 19, lived below the poverty line, in households with an income of less than 60% of the UK average. I suspect the figures are the same in the hon. Gentleman’s constituency and in those of the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) and the hon. Members who speak after me.

In 2017-18, the poverty threshold in Northern Ireland stood at £19,016 of annual income for a single person with two children, and £24,245 for a couple with two children. The Minister knows that I am very fond of him and what he does, and I believe he will answer our questions to the best of his ability, but I say to him that we need a UK strategy and additional funding to tackle child poverty. The situation in my constituency is the same as the situation that the hon. Members for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill and for Motherwell and Wishaw described. Society, the Government and
[Jim Shannon]

elected representatives are marked by the way they respond to those who are less well off. I do not believe for one second that we can ignore them; the Government must reach out and help.

During Northern Ireland questions today, an hon. Member—in fact, it was the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw; I should have recognised her name earlier—asked the Secretary of State:

“What economic assessment he has made of the potential effect of the Government’s proposed withdrawal agreement on Northern Ireland.”

In a subsequent question, the hon. Member for Birmingham, Selly Oak (Steve McCabe) asked about “legislative proposals to maintain welfare mitigation payments in Northern Ireland after March 2020.”

The right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) and the hon. Member for Bermondsey and Old Southwark (Neil Coyle) tabled the same question.

My party—the Democratic Unionist party—and our Minister at that time were instrumental in achieving those welfare mitigation payments. At the end of March 2020, those provisions will end, and members of the public from all communities and of all political and religious persuasions across Northern Ireland will be disadvantaged because of Sinn Féin’s intransigence. We have an opportunity because my party put on the statute book legislation that enabled welfare mitigation payments to be made. Those payments came out of the block budget, by the way, but we agreed to that and acted accordingly. I did not get the chance to ask Northern Ireland Office Ministers directly earlier, but I ask this Minister: what can be done to mitigate the impact, which will be severe?

I will make a final comment about food banks, Sir David. Food banks are often talked about, and have probably been mentioned by everyone who is present here. The first Trussell Trust food bank in Northern Ireland was in my constituency. It came to Strangford because a number of church groups got together and recognised the need to reach out as faith groups, in order to help others who found themselves in difficulties making payments or paying bills, or when everything seemed to turn against them.

On the television this morning there was a discussion about debt organisations; I have not had a chance to watch it yet. It is not always a person who has benefit delays or benefit short payments who needs debt management; more often it is people who do not fit into the normal category. Minister, when it comes to addressing child poverty, what has been done to help those who need debt management? It is always better to try to address debt management early on, rather than let people get to the final moment, when letters are coming through their door; they are under pressure, their credit cards are over-egged and they find themselves in difficulties. People who are in employment, have a mortgage and who own a house may also need help.

There are people who come to my office who use the Thrive! Life food bank in my area. I highlight the DWP and the changes that have been made to benefits as referred to by the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw and for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill. There is a follow-on that is down to benefits being reduced or, when the issue of housing benefit is looked at, delayed. It is also down to employment issues, such as shorter hours and changes to minimum pay.

Dr Whitford: The hon. Gentleman raises the issue of food banks. There is hardly an area that does not now have a food bank. My local area is supported by churches that have a rota to collect goods. Recently, our food bank has often had to put out crisis calls because its shelves are simply empty; it cannot keep up with demand. As the health spokesperson for his party, does the hon. Gentleman recognise the impact on life expectancy and on long-term physical and mental health that comes from growing up in poverty?

Jim Shannon: I thank the hon. Lady; she is always good in this House when it comes to bringing forward issues that are pertinent to the debate. She again excels today in bringing forward this issue of food banks and the needs they address. The people who use them are under pressure emotionally and mentally, which transfers to physical issues. When that happens, the problems that the hon. Lady refers to become real for them.

I recognise, as I know the hon. Lady does, that those who have set up the food banks are genuine, interested people who bring the best of people together. They reach out to those who need help, as their faith tells them to do, which is a great motivation. I almost feel encouraged by the food banks and those who are motivated to make them happen, but calls go out to ensure that people bring in more stock, because demand is sometimes high.

We appreciate what the food banks, the volunteers and the churches do when they work together. When it comes to child poverty, whether it be in Scotland or Northern Ireland, we all want the same. We want children to have a good quality of life and we want their families to be able to look after them in the way it was designed in life that they should. For that to happen I believe, with great respect, that the Government must look genuinely at what they do.

The issue of debt management is important to child poverty; it is crucial. Nothing disturbs me as much as seeing children in difficulty; there are two or three such children who come to my office. The hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw mentioned Christmas. As Christmas comes, the child who lives three doors down will probably get almost anything he or she wants, but the child living in poverty will not get anything. There is a terrible injustice in society when we come to Christmas, a time of giving and good will, that those who are in poverty will not be able to have the same as everyone else.

3.4 pm

Patricia Gibson (North Ayrshire and Arran) (SNP): I congratulate the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) on securing the debate. In my constituency, one third of children live in poverty, and it has the third-worst statistics in the whole of Scotland for child poverty. That is shameful in this day and age, and it matters, because I grew up in abject poverty and I know what it is like. Poverty is not just about a lack of money, although clearly that is the foundation on which all poverty is built. It bleeds into every single area of life, and it is hugely damaging for
The children affected. It does not just mean a cold house, or going to bed with an empty, hungry tummy; this is bad enough and completely unacceptable in this day and age. It also brings with it a poverty of hope, aspiration, self-confidence and self-belief.

Material poverty reduces and lays waste to the things we want all children to have. It is life-limiting, and too often leads children into a pit from which it is hard for them to escape. Even if, on growing up, they manage to drag themselves out of poverty, it leaves scars behind that do not vanish on reaching adulthood.

I have spoken in the past about how poverty brings isolation. When people live in poverty, there is no money to access local services. Parents cannot take their children out for a treat for the day: they cannot go to the pictures or visit the local café. They cannot have the everyday pleasures that ought to be part of every child’s life. It means that their life is limited and their horizons are not broadened. Many things are out of reach for them. That life limiting brings another kind of poverty, which arises from material poverty. That is a shocking indictment of a country as rich as ours.

**Dr Whitford:** My hon. Friend was a teacher in a former life, before she came here. I am sure that she recognises the impact of the cold house and the hungry tummy on trying to concentrate and study. These children will struggle at school, which will impact on all their goals at school, whether those are academic or vocational. It is much more difficult than other children to attain their aspiration, self-confidence and self-belief.

**Patricia Gibson:** Absolutely. My hon. Friend makes an excellent point. The fact is that unless child poverty is addressed, raising aspiration and attainment is like working with one hand tied behind your back. Children who are hungry or go home to a cold house tend to find it much more difficult than other children to attain their goals at school, whether those are academic or vocational. Their life is limited in ways that are difficult for people who have not experienced poverty to imagine.

The Scottish Government are doing what they can to tackle child poverty. Their Child Poverty (Scotland) Bill sets tough targets to reduce child poverty levels. A £50 million fund will support innovative approaches to tackle child poverty. Free early years childcare has been expanded to 30 hours per week, and there is a new best start grant to provide financial support to low-income families. The popular baby box gives practical support to new parents. An initiative that has been unveiled recently is the Scottish child payment, which provides £10 per week for each child.

These measures are welcome and can ease the scourgfe of child poverty, but they cannot remove it. We need to use all the levers of tax and benefits to make the inroads required to remove it. The Scottish Government have power over 16% of social security spending, and that is better than 0%, but it is far from what is required to tackle this scourge on our society.

It is no accident—the Minister has heard this—that the roll-out of universal credit brings with it a spike in food bank use. In my constituency in the past year, 8,173 people relied on food bank assistance, of whom 2,192 were children. That is an absolute disgrace in this day and age, although I pay huge tribute to the food bank organisations in Ardrossan and Largs in my constituency, which do tremendously good work against challenging odds.

**Stephen Kerr (Stirling) (Con):** Will the hon. Lady give way?

**Patricia Gibson:** Just a minute. The hon. Gentleman was not here at the start of the debate, so I do not know if I am allowed to.

People are punished for being poor. Their children are punished as well, and left without the support that they need. That damages the life chances of children and their parents. Benefits must reflect people’s need—it is as simple as that.

We have heard today about the five-week wait for universal credit, which is unacceptable, but I have something very specific that I want the Minister to take away and think about. I have raised it before—to no avail, as far as I can see. When people have a five-week wait for universal credit, they are offered loans—it does not matter what they are called—by the Department for Work and Pensions to help them through that five weeks. We might think that that helps ease the pain of waiting five weeks for a proper assessment and proper universal credit payments to be made, but I say this to the Minister: if anybody seeks to take out a loan in the normal course of events, they go to a bank and ask for a loan. Their creditworthiness and ability to repay is assessed, and that determines whether they will be given the loan. People on universal credit waiting for the five-week payment are not assessed. They are given loans when it is clear that they are not able to repay them. Attempts to repay the loan shove them further into poverty and despair, and that pushes them further away from the world of work. It is simply not on. It is not working. The Government really need to look at the transitional payments, which are actually loans. Those payments should not be loans. People need support during those five weeks.

The Child Poverty Action Group has said that it is time—I am sure the Minister is aware of this—for the UK Government to use their powers, as the Scottish Government have done, in an equally positive way to develop a wider UK child poverty strategy, so that both Governments can work together to make child poverty history across the UK. I cannot understand why anybody would object to that. I am sure the Minister will want to think carefully and reflect on that.

We have the phenomenon of in-work poverty. The Scottish Government support the real living wage, and many employers, with the Scottish Government’s encouragement, have signed up to paying it in Scotland. The Minister will be interested to hear that employers who have decided to pay the real living wage have reported increased productivity and reduced sick leave, so valuing people is important. It gives me no pleasure to say this to the Minister, but the UK Government have sought to deceive with their pretendy living wage. Nothing should be called a living wage unless it is based on the cost of living. The Government’s pretendy living wage is not, so it should not be called that. This pretendy living wage has led directly to the scandal of in-work poverty, which is absolutely appalling.

The cruel and austere policies of the UK Government are deeply damaging and dangerous for children in my constituency, and they must not go unchallenged. I recently participated in a debate in the Chamber on—I cannot believe I am saying this out loud—childhood hunger. The fact that that is even a thing, that it even
exists, is embarrassing and shameful. I do not know how the Minister feels, but if I was part of a Government who presided over childhood hunger and had the ability, as a member of the Government, to do something about it, I would not hesitate. I cannot understand the reluctance. The Government really need to get their act together and take real measures to support children, instead of punishing those who need support. Eradicating child poverty needs to be a priority; it is as simple as that. It cannot be an afterthought or an add-on. It needs to be a priority, and it cannot be considered inconvenient. If we cannot invest in our children, and cannot go to bed at night safe in the knowledge that children are not going to bed hungry, we are doing this all wrong.

I want the Minister to tell us today what serious attempts he is prepared to make, as a member of the Government, to address what can only be described as a scandal. I will make a commitment to him today. Any measures that he takes to tackle child poverty in the UK will find support on the Scottish National party benches. Scotland’s children need and deserve better.

3.15 pm

Brendan O’Hara (Argyll and Bute) (SNP): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) on securing this important debate on child poverty in Scotland. The scourge of poverty and the effect that it has on our children, as well as the knock-on effects that it will have into future generations, is an issue that unites us all, and I am sure that many in this place, if not everyone, share much of the anger and frustration that he articulated in his opening remarks. Of course, he knows that child poverty is not confined to the central belt of Scotland; rural poverty is a blight as well. I know from personal experience that child poverty needs to be a priority; it is as simple as that. It cannot be an afterthought or an add-on. It needs to be a priority, and it cannot be considered inconvenient. If we cannot invest in our children, and cannot go to bed at night safe in the knowledge that children are not going to bed hungry, we are doing this all wrong.

Stephen Kerr: Will the hon. Gentleman give way?

Brendan O’Hara: I will take your guidance, Sir David. Given that the hon. Gentleman turned up 21 minutes late and missed the opening speeches, am I allowed to take an intervention?

Sir David Craswy (in the Chair): Whether or not to give way is entirely in the gift of the Member who has the Floor. Given that you have mentioned the hon. Gentleman, I think that you should give way.

Brendan O’Hara: Following your guidance, Sir David, I give way.

Stephen Kerr: I am grateful to you, Sir David, for your judgment, and to the hon. Gentleman for giving way. I tried to make a contribution during the previous speech. The hon. Gentleman’s attack on my colleagues and I, the Scottish Conservatives at Westminster, is all too typical of the antics that the SNP gets up to in this place. In relation to grievances, no one can match the SNP. It was said in the previous speech—I am sure that this will be the hon. Gentleman’s position as well—that if they had the ability to do something, the Government should do something on child poverty. Who is for child poverty? We are not. We are trying our best to eradicate it. The Scottish Government have the power to top up reserved benefits, so they could do something about this if they wanted to, but they do not want to because it is a convenient grievance.

Brendan O’Hara: Had the hon. Gentleman wished to make a speech of that length, he would have turned up in time and perhaps brought one or two of his Scottish Conservative colleagues with him.

As we have heard, there are 1 million people living in poverty in Scotland, and almost one in four of them are children. In 2019, 250,000 children living in one of the world’s richest nations are growing up in poverty. That is nothing short of scandalous. Poverty is not inevitable. People not having enough money to feed and clothe their children is not something that happens by accident. The existence of poverty in a country as rich as ours is a direct consequence of political choices.

The decade of austerity was a political choice. Massive long-term cuts to the social security budget were a political choice. The widening of the holes in the social security safety net so that more families and children would fall through was a political choice. The ill-conceived and hopelessly financed introduction of universal credit was a political choice. Making the poorest, weakest and most vulnerable in our society carry the can, and bear the brunt of a financial crisis that had nothing to do with them, was a political choice.

No matter how we look at it, it is an inescapable fact that the Tory Government, and indeed the Liberal Democrats, who were in the previous coalition Government—they, too, are conspicuous by their absence today—are directly responsible for plunging children and families into poverty across Scotland and the UK.

Dr Whitford: Is it not a disgrace that it has not been confirmed at this point that the benefit freeze brought in when inflation was at 0.3%—it is now 2.5%—will be done away with, as originally planned in April?

Brendan O’Hara: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention and will touch on that in a moment.

There can be no doubt that, as we have heard this afternoon, one of the main drivers of child poverty in Scotland has been the Government’s package of welfare reforms, which by any measure has been an abject failure. How else could one describe a package of reforms whose result is that 65% of all the children who live in poverty come from households where at least one adult is working? There is no need to take my word for it. The United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty said:

“Changes to benefits, and sanctions against parents...are driving the increase in child poverty”.

Some would still have us believe that it will take decades to turn things around and lift children out of poverty, but that is simply not true. There are measures
that the UK Government could take right now that would immediately stop children and their families falling into poverty. One of those, which my hon. Friend the Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whiteford) just mentioned, would be to end the benefits freeze immediately. The Government should then immediately stop the roll-out of universal credit, take their time, and find the money to fix the major problems in the system, which they are only too well aware of but choose to ignore.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens) said, the scrapping of the five-week minimum wait for a first universal credit payment must come to an end. The idea that poor people who are given advances need to pay them back serves only to plunge people further into debt. I congratulate the Select Committee on Work and Pensions on today’s report recommending putting an end to the two-child limit and its despicable rape clause. The idea that sanctions work for people has been proven untrue.

There is therefore a package of things that the Government could do immediately to stop the situation and turn it around. Of course, none of what I say will come as a surprise to the Minister, as we and others have been making the argument in this place for some time. We will continue to make it until the UK Government do something about it, or until the Scottish Government are given full powers over welfare or, better still, until they have them as an independent nation within the European Union.

My hon. Friend the Member for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows) spoke passionately and eloquently about the situation in her constituency, but her most powerful words came at the start of her speech when she quoted her constituent, Derek Kelter, who said:

“Poverty destroys everything in your life.”

Consider that. It is all that politicians need to hear, because it cannot be unheard.

As always, I am delighted that the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) has taken the time to be here. He made the powerful point that, although the debate is about Scotland, child poverty is not confined to Scotland but is rampant across every part of the United Kingdom. If it is a disgrace in Dundee, it is a blight in Belfast. If the UK Government cannot or will not do something about it, they should give the devolved Administrations the power to do so themselves.

My colleague, my hon. Friend the Member for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), gave a powerful and moving personal testimony about poverty in childhood and how it leads to poverty of hope, aspiration and opportunity. Most movingly, she said that even though one might escape material poverty as an adult, the deep scars do not easily go away even in adulthood.

We have heard much this afternoon about what the Scottish Government are doing, and I am extremely proud that they are using the limited powers at their disposal to tackle child poverty. What sets them apart from the United Kingdom Government is the fact that is in receipt of qualifying benefits. Initially, 170,000 children will be eligible for the payment, which will lift 30,000 children out of poverty by putting £1,000 a year into the pockets of their parents. John Dickie, director of the Child Poverty Action Group in Scotland, described the new payment as a “game-changer”, and he is right. The Scottish Government care about people and, despite the meagre resources available to them, will do what they can. Just think what they could do if they had full powers to create a more progressive, economically healthy and socially just welfare system.

It is worth recognising that the achievement of the Scottish Government in tackling child poverty has been singled out by the United Nations special rapporteur on extreme poverty, who praised their “ambitious schemes for addressing poverty, including the Fairer Scotland Action Plan and the Tackling Child Poverty Delivery Plan”.

The rapporteur also praised the Scottish Government for using their “newly devolved powers to establish a promising social security system, guided by the principles of dignity”.

Perhaps the Minister should take note of what the United Nations has said about Scotland and encourage the UK Government to follow our example.

3.27 pm

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to follow so many passionate and thoughtful speeches. My reflection on the debate and Members’ contributions—particularly that of my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney), whom I congratulate on securing the debate—is that poverty is, fundamentally, probably the worst evil in our society. It is particularly pernicious, because it is a cruel and indiscriminate denial of opportunity to many people who have great potential.

My constituency has some of the highest child poverty levels in Scotland—and in the UK as a whole. When I go round it, I am constantly reminded of the denial of opportunity to many young people, particularly children. There was a turn of phrase used by Jim Reid when looking at high-rise tower blocks in my constituency—the infamous Red Road flats, which are now demolished and being redeveloped. He said that behind every one of the windows could be a Nobel prize-winning chemist, or a great Formula 1 racing driver, a fantastic doctor, engineer or perhaps Prime Minister, but—you know what?—they will never get the opportunity because of where they were born and the circumstances in which they were brought up. From birth they have been denied their potential. As a nation and as a community, that sabotage of young people’s lives is the greatest loss to us all, and in many cases it is literally a life sentence.

In the early 1990s Jim Reid made a documentary in Scotland, and he was filmed standing in a field between Milingavie and Drumnchapel. The camera panned across the field, and he said that a child who is born on one side of the fields will live 10 years longer than a child born on the other side of the field, in Drumnchapel. The average sentence for murder in Scotland is not far
of 10 to 15 years, so far many children born in those circumstances, that is literally a life sentence. That destroyed potential is a great tragedy for us all.

Child poverty can be solved through political means—it is not inevitable, as many speakers have suggested; it can be solved. Child poverty has been both demonstrably reduced and demonstrably accelerated at the behest of policies of various Governments, and if there is one thing I can be proud of about the previous Labour Government, it is their efforts to reduce child poverty. When Labour came to power in 1997, child poverty stood at 3.6 million in the UK. When Labour left office in 2010, that figure had been reduced to 1 million. That was still too many, but it was a significant and demonstrable reduction. Today child poverty stands at 4 million—more than a reversal of those achievements—and we must address that generational tragedy.

We should not get too bogged down in the minutiae of Brexit; instead, we should focus on what we could be doing. What motivates me—and probably most Members—to get out of bed in the morning, is thinking about how we can leave a legacy that will improve lives for future generations. That certainly motivates me, my hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill and other Members of the House, yet this Government have demonstrably, deliberately and consciously implemented policies that have permanently damaged lives.

Stephen Kerr indicated dissent.

Mr Sweeney: It is true. Those policies will have a material effect on children born in this decade of austerity. We are visiting huge destruction not just on their lives, but on a whole community that has been denied those opportunities, and when we reflect on what Members have said today, that is the greatest tragedy.

One of the most moving aspects of this is the fact that child poverty is driven primarily by insufficient income, yet 65% of all children living in poverty in Scotland live in working households. Parents are trying to do what they can. They are not feckless or idle; they are trying to achieve what they can, but the capacity of the economy to meet their basic income requirements is not there. That is a legacy of this Government, their failure to address the 2008 financial crash, and their entire counter-productive austerity agenda, which has retarded economic growth in this country and caused one of the most regionally unbalanced and slow-paced recoveries of any major economy in the western world.

Stephen Kerr: Does the hon. Gentleman welcome the fact that this Government have lifted the threshold after which people start paying tax to £12,500? That really helps people. Combined with that, we have increases in the national living wage. Does he not welcome those as well? Does he welcome the fact that the Government have introduced policies to allow people at the lower end of the income scale to keep more of their own money, so that they can spend it on their families? Does he welcome any of the policies that the Government have introduced to tackle child poverty?

Mr Sweeney: I would congratulate the Government if they had demonstrably increased incomes for people on low wages, but wage growth in this country has been the lowest in the western world, and that is the primary measure of success.

Stephen Kerr: Tax!

Mr Sweeney: The hon. Gentleman makes a point about tax, but the tax threshold was never met by people on the lowest incomes in the first place, so that measure does not deal with people at that end of the scale. People who already rely on social security benefits have been crushed by the two-child welfare cap that has been mentioned. Those are the things that affect people.

One searing example of that can be found in a recent report by Oxfam, Child Poverty Action Group Scotland and the Poverty Alliance, which addresses the issue of hunger in Scotland. It is an inspiring and chilling report, and the thing that strikes me most is the testimony that it contains. One example is from a lady called Alison. She is typical of many people—usually women—who turn up to my constituency surgeries in horrendous circumstances. A person might be born and brought up in a constituency and live there their whole life, as I have, but they never know the half of it until they become a Member of Parliament and realise what is going on behind closed doors.

Many people are too proud to come and demonstrate that they are suffering and have problems. They do not want to make a spectacle of themselves, and they are upset about having to speak to a Member of Parliament about their circumstances. The example from Alison is particularly egregious. Speaking about the whole issue of food insecurity and the wellbeing of our children, she said:

“My son, throughout the whole of this, was scared to put the heating on. He was scared to put the light on. He was sitting in the dark. He’s not playing his computer. What else is he meant to do when he’s socially isolated? When there’s no money to go on a bus, never mind take him out for the day...When things were on a level, it’s very, very sad to even say, he was just happy that we went for a hot chocolate and a muffin. Now that’s a simple thing. That is not doable anymore.”

Another parent said:

“Me and my daughter used to go everywhere. But now, I don’t have anything like, so we can’t do anything.”

One mother said:

“I’ve felt suicidal more times than I’ve had hot dinners and that’s no joke.”

That is a true testimony from someone suffering in Scotland now.

To me, it is offensive at a very fundamental level if the great achievements of the welfare state have been rolled back to the extent that people are suffering in this way. Not only is there the shameing need for people to go to food banks and prostrate themselves in front of authority figures to demonstrate that they need help, but we have also removed the social floor that was there for many people. We created the idea that there was a floor beneath which no one would fall and above which everyone could rise. That is how my family progressed, and how I was able to have opportunities that my parents did not have. To think that that has been reversed under this Government is offensive.
Dr Whitford: Does the hon. Gentleman recognise that part of that has been the change from what used to be “social security”, to what is now called “welfare”? In the past, no matter whatever happened to someone, we knew that they would somehow be safe, but that has been removed. I served on a committee with the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) to consider the children’s future food inquiry. We took evidence from children about the hunger that they suffered from at school—I kept having to put my glasses on to hide that I was crying. That is ridiculous in a country such as this.

Mr Sweeney: It is ridiculous. The scourge of things such as people having no recourse to public funds is a particularly horrific example of that. A couple of weeks ago a lady came to my surgery. She looked emaciated. I asked if she was all right, because she looked as if she was going to faint. I brought her in, sat her down, and we gave her a plate of shortbread. She scoffed it in front of us in a couple of minutes in a way that otherwise would have been impolite, but under the circumstances we were horrified that she could be so hungry that she was grabbing food in front of us. I could not believe that someone was in that situation because of having no recourse to public funds. She was destitute; she had left an abusive relationship with her child, and she was trying to find somewhere to shelter. There was no availability of homeless accommodation in Glasgow at that point. She was being helped by a women’s refuge charity that did not have long-term accommodation. That she was driven to that sort of desperation is just one example of the circumstances in which people find themselves.

The case of Alison in the report that I mentioned is typical. The hon. Member for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford) mentioned the concept of social security as a system that would save everyone, and the change from that to a welfare system—it is almost like a return to the poor laws of the Victorian era, with the idea that this involves some sort of virtue and vice.

My constituency has seen the biggest loss of anywhere in Scotland resulting from the change from the disability living allowance to the personal independence payment—£1.9 million a year out of the pockets of my constituents, and behind that figure is a lot of pain. This is about how fragile people’s lives are, not just about immediate need. Most people’s finances are delicate, and one unexpected crisis in their life—a failed relationship or job, an unexpected cost because their central heating has failed, or whatever it might be—could push them into relying on welfare. The truly horrendous thing is when they get into that spiral. Alison says,

“I vowed I wouldn’t take out credit cards or loans. But you find you get gobbled up, you have to do it because there’s no other way”.

People end up in the debt spiral, compounded by this Government’s universal credit policies. Instead of focusing on the immediate need for cash and income and the ability to bridge finances, there is the initial loan, which creates a spiral of decline as people dig themselves into compounded debt. That is the biggest tragedy.

In the case of Alison, we can see the build-up of debts. The milestones are indicated in the report. She is a lone parent with two sons, both of whom have disabilities. Alison loses her personal independence payment. Her son’s DLA is downgraded. Alison loses the carer’s allowance. Her son attempts suicide. As we all too often see, after she went to her Member of Parliament for help, the PIP and the higher-rate DLA were both reinstated—so it was an injustice from the start. But where was the pain? The pain was that her son tried to take his own life.

That is someone in Dundee. I cannot believe that it is happening in 2019. This is what we are up against, and it is seen as socially acceptable. All of it has been clouded out and displaced by the squabbling over Brexit and the high-level stuff that we have been consumed by. Going into this election campaign, I think most of us want to get down to saying, “This is a choice between death and life for so many people in this country.”

That is what is on offer here. It is not about what flags are where, what borders are where or what is going on in the constitutional sense; it is about whether we can get money into people’s pockets quickly through political decisions made here and elsewhere in this country, to improve lives. That is the priority for us all, I think; let us hope we can achieve that as best we can and make those arguments out there.

There is a multifaceted approach. Many hon. Members have talked about different aspects of child poverty. It is fair to say that it mostly tracks decisions made at a UK Government level, because the primary driver of the social security system, the dynamic in this country, is the Department for Work and Pensions. That is the primary driver, and the behaviour of incomes will track the decisions made there.

I will point out that there is a big opportunity in Scotland now, with the changes in devolved policy: I welcome the measures that have been taken. There has been a divergence between Scotland and the rest of the UK in terms of poverty after housing costs, but there is an interesting aspect to that. The reality is that that happens because more people in poverty in Scotland live in the social rented sector than in the private rented sector, and the larger social rented sector has long been considered a key reason why poverty after housing costs is lower in Scotland than in the rest of the UK.

We can see why that would happen. It is all about income. The rents are lower in social housing because there is more opportunity to control them—but that is still not going far enough. My hon. Friend the Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill mentioned house building; I do not want to get into the quibbles over it, because I find them a bit tedious, but I point out that the records have been fairly consistent. If we look at completions per year, it was 3,617 units per year over the eight years of the Labour-Lib Dem Government in Scotland under devolution. Since then, it has been 3,316 per year under the 12 years of the SNP Administration from 2007.

However, there has been a significant drop-off in the rate of completions since 2010-11, which we need to address. Let us work together on this, because there is an opportunity to recapitalise Scotland’s social housing capacity, which is a key driver of bringing down poverty. Not only must we do that, but we must focus on rent controls. I am very proud of the idea of a Mary Barbour Act. Putting rent controls on not only the social rented sector but the private rented sector is a huge opportunity to reduce the overall cost burden on families living on
the breadline. That is a major impact and we can make it now. Those policies are devolved. We can have an impact on that front. We can also improve aspects of poverty and access to work through transport improvements; removing the costs of transport and commuting can help families. However, we must also utilise the great capacity of financial powers to top up and enhance welfare benefits wherever we can.

The introduction of certain benefits has been positive, but we are seeing some teething problems. We know that the Scottish child payment is generally a great thing—it is a good idea and I congratulate the Scottish Government on it—but we also know that 58,000 children face losing out on the £520-a-year benefit on their sixth birthday, because their low-income families will stop getting the payment.

I know that that is to do with the transfer of information and so on between the DWP and Social Security Scotland, but we need to get a grip of it quickly. We need better management and better collaboration between the two Governments to get that sorted out, to ensure that we can lift another 30,000 children out of poverty more rapidly. I hope that that can be achieved, and that we can really make some inroads on it.

We must also look at the aspect of childcare—I will finish on this issue. One of my constituents, who I went to school with, wrote to me and said:

“...Second child arrived in April this year. He is a very healthy child who I hope will go on to great things when he is older. However for the moment he is only 6 months old and when he is 9 months old my wife is to return to work after 9 months on maternity leave.”

They are a typical working-class Glaswegian family, with only relatively modest incomes. His wife is currently receiving the bare minimum statutory maternity pay, so as a family they are struggling financially, and have been since their first child was born. He states that he is “extremely dissatisfied with this mediocre maternity pay amount in what is supposed to be 5th largest economy in the world”.

My constituent’s main issue is how this new 30 hours of free child care scheme is being applied. His argument is that it is essentially “robbing Peter to pay Paul”, as resources for nursery are being pulled from the baby stage, from nought to two years, and reallocated to the toddler stage at two years-plus. He goes on to say:

“For a long time this government have been woefully inept at providing sufficient support to families, who particularly during the 9 month to 3 years stage...where the mother is required to return back to work as state/employer benefits stop at this point. How this 30 hour free scheme is being applied is just the icing on the cake.”

My constituent’s argument is that we cannot continue to allow this gap of nearly two years to continue. As it stands, his boy cannot get a place in nursery, because the cheaper ones are full and cannot take more, and the ones that are available charge a hefty day rate of £50 a day. It is completely unfair, and certainly does not make work pay for his family, so he wants that looked at. Access to childcare liberates people to get to work as well, so that it is a critically important point in tackling this, and it cuts across Government, so let us hope something can be done.

I will not take any more time, but I think we can see that the problem is multifaceted. I hope that all Governments can work in collaboration to solve this intractable problem in our society. We know it can be done through political action, political agency and political choice, so let us make it a priority in this election campaign.

3.46 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Will Quince): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir David. I congratulate the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill (Hugh Gaffney) on securing this important debate. There is no doubt that he is a passionate campaigner on this issue, and he knows me well enough to know that I share his passion for tackling poverty in all its forms.

The hon. Gentleman said that there are too many children living in poverty. I agree entirely—in my view, one child in poverty is one child too many. It is absolutely a priority for me, as it is for this Government. As he will know, I have not been in this role for very long—and, who knows, in six weeks’ time I may not be a Member of Parliament, let alone a Work and Pensions Minister—but I stress that I have made this a priority from day one at the Department, and I have been looking at all sorts of options that we could take up to tackle child poverty.

Hon. Members across this Chamber will recognise that very few of the figures that cross my desk end with an “m”; they end with a “bn”. They tend to be very expensive measures indeed, requiring a fiscal event, but I hope that hon. Members will rest assured, knowing me as they do, that I have been exploring those options and making submissions to the Treasury accordingly.

A number of issues have been raised, and I am conscious that, as always with these debates, we have very little time to address them in the level of detail and granularity that I would like. However, I stress to colleagues that—subject to my being back here in six weeks’ time—as I have always said, my door is always open and I am happy to discuss these matters with a group or on an individual basis. The hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill raised topics including in-work poverty, universal credit, food insecurity and food banks, housing and temporary accommodation, and homelessness; I will try to address as many of those issues as possible in a very short period of time.

On the question of housing, I kindly ask the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill to make representations elsewhere. Although I have responsibility for the housing benefit budget, which is some £23.5 billion—with regard to his representations to me, he is largely pushing against an open door when he raises the need for more affordable housing and homes for social rent—I encourage him and hon. Members across the House to make such representations to the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government and to the Treasury, because in my view secure and stable housing plays an important part in tackling poverty at its root.

We also heard powerful contributions from the hon. Members for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson) and for Strangford (Jim Shannon), whom I have huge respect for and have worked with on a number of other issues.
I take their representations very seriously indeed. I do not agree with every point that they made—they would be surprised if I did—but I thank them for the constructive nature of their contributions.

As the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill said, we all have the same objective: to tackle child poverty and wider poverty at its root causes. We do not want to see any children in poverty. We have different ideas about the journey and how to get there but, ultimately, we all want the same thing. I am absolutely determined to work as closely as I can with the Scottish Government, working hand in hand where we can and learning from each other about the different measures that we try, to ensure that we have the best approach to truly tackling child poverty. I will talk about that a little bit.

Delivering a sustainable, long-term solution to all forms of poverty remains a priority for me and the Government. Our welfare reforms are driven by our firm conviction that the benefits system must work with the tax system and the labour market to support employment and higher pay, so that everyone has the chance to succeed and to share in the benefits of a strong economy. Supporting employment is also key to ensuring better long-term outcomes for disadvantaged children, because we know that children in working households do better at every stage of their education.

We are proud, as a Government, of the progress that we have made. We now have a near record-breaking 66% for two-parent families with only part-time work. The unemployment rate has more than halved since 2010. 

Marion Fellows: I understand the improvements in employment, but child poverty is not improved if people cannot make a decent living even when they are employed. Does the Minister agree?

Will Quince: I will talk about in-work poverty, because that issue was raised. We take child poverty extremely seriously. I raise the additional 3.6 million people in work—around 1,000 per day since the Government came into office in 2010—because of the clear evidence that children in working households are not only less likely to grow up in poverty but have significantly better life chances.

To give the hon. Member for Motherwell and Wishaw the statistics, a child living in a household where every adult is working is around five times less likely to be in relative poverty than a child in a household where nobody works, and children growing up in workless families are almost twice as likely as children in working families to fail at all stages of their education. It is important to note that 44,000 fewer children are in workless households do better at every stage of their education.

The statistics, a child living in a household where every adult is working is around five times less likely to be in relative poverty than a child in a household where nobody works, and children growing up in workless families are almost twice as likely as children in working families to fail at all stages of their education. It is important to note that 44,000 fewer children are in workless households do better at every stage of their education.

The Government believe that tackling poverty requires an approach that goes beyond providing a financial safety net through the Department for Work and Pensions. That requires a collective approach that addresses the root causes of poverty and disadvantage to improve long-term outcomes for children and families, which is why we have taken wider cross-Government action to support and to make a lasting difference to the lives of the most vulnerable, who often face complex employment barriers. That is people whose ability to work is, for example, frustrated by issues such as a disrupted education, a history of offending, mental health issues, or drug and alcohol abuse. That is why our jobcentre work coaches work with external partners to offer individualised, specialist support to help some of the most vulnerable people in our society to turn their lives around.

Dr Whitford: I do not think anyone would argue with the Government’s going beyond mere income, but the problem is that income is still part of poverty, and therefore taking other action instead of dealing with a lack of income simply does not solve the problem.

Will Quince: It is not the case that we have just pushed people into low-paid and insecure, part-time work—I do not know whether that is the point the hon. Lady is making. However, it is important to stress that around three quarters of the growth in employment since 2010 has been in full-time work. We know, because I shared the statistics, that being in full-time work substantially reduces the risk of being in poverty. There is only around a 7% chance of a child being in relative poverty if both parents work full time, compared with 66% for two-parent families with only part-time work.

Several hon. Members raised universal credit, which I do not think I have time to touch on in the detail I would like. However, universal credit supports full-time work through smooth incentives to increase hours, a general expectation that lone parents and partners should work—unless caring for young children or a disabled person—and generous childcare subsidies. It is important to note that we have also gone much further to support working families than previous Governments.

Patricia Gibson: I thank the Minister for giving way. I know he is short of time. He touched on universal credit. Will he commit to looking at the five-week wait and people having to take out loans, which pushes them further and deeper into persistent poverty? People’s ability to repay them is not considered, and families and children suffer tremendously as a result. Will he commit to taking that up with the Secretary of State for Work and Pensions?

Will Quince: I look closely at all elements within my portfolio. Universal credit is probably the largest element of my portfolio, newly added in the most recent reshuffle. On the first assessment period, it is important to stress that it is not a loan but an advance of the first indicative award, and it is interest-free and repayable over a 12-month period. We are already going further, because that will go up to 16 months, and I am exploring ways in which we could potentially increase that further. At present, around 60% of people take that up. The issue the hon. Lady raises is often raised with me by a number of the stakeholders and organisations that the Department works closely with. I am looking at it, of course, but fundamentally we can have a system based either on advances or on arrears.

We now also have a two-week roll-on of housing benefit for those moving on to universal credit, and as of 2021 that will include a two-week run-on of income.
support, jobseeker’s allowance and employment support allowance. This month we are reducing the maximum level of deductions from 40% to 30%. We are listening and we do make changes, but those changes can only be made within fiscal events. Of course, as I mentioned at the beginning, it will come as no surprise to the hon. Member for North Ayrshire and Arran to hear that I am looking at a number of measures ahead of the next fiscal event to improve universal credit, because we do listen to Members from across the House and to the stakeholders that feed into the Department.

I am conscious of the time, and I want the hon. Member for Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill to have an opportunity to wind up the debate, so I will conclude. I reaffirm our view that the long-term approach that we are taking is the right one if we are to deliver lasting change. However, we are not complacent; this is an area of real focus for me and the Department. The Government believe that work provides economic independence, pride in having a job and improved wellbeing. I look forward to continuing to work with colleagues from across the House, the Scottish Government and other devolved Administrations and charities to tackle poverty in all its forms.

3.58 pm

Hugh Gaffney: I thank everybody who has spoken, including my hon. Friends the Members for East Lothian (Martin Whitfield), for Edinburgh South (Ian Murray) and for Glasgow North East (Mr Sweeney) and the hon. Members for Glasgow South West (Chris Stephens), for North Ayrshire and Arran (Patricia Gibson), for Central Ayrshire (Dr Whitford), for Motherwell and Wishaw (Marion Fellows), for Argyll and Bute (Brendan O’Hara), for Strangford (Jim Shannon) and for Stirling (Stephen Kerr), and the Minister. I also thank the Library for the information that it supplied, as well as the Poverty Alliance, Shelter Scotland, Oxfam, all the food banks and, more importantly, all their volunteers. Finally, I thank all parents who do their best to feed and look after their children; I know that some of them starve themselves just to do that.

As I said at the beginning, we all care about our children. After all, they are the future adults who will, hopefully, care for us later in life. I thank all Members again. Hopefully, whoever returns to the House after the general election will pick up what we have said and, more importantly, will eradicate child poverty, not only in Scotland but across the UK.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,

That this House has considered child poverty in Scotland.

Bus Passes: 1950s-born Women

[SIR CHRISTOPHER CHOPE IN THE CHAIR]

3.59 pm

Mr Jim Cunningham (Coventry South) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered bus passes for 1950s women.

Thank you very much for chairing the debate, Sir Christopher. You and I have known each other a long time, and this is probably one of the last debates in which I will take part in the House of Commons. I thought that I might end my political activities by raising an issue that is very important to about 4 million women in this country. But I should make it clear right at the beginning of the debate that providing bus passes would not be a substitute for putting right the wrongs in relation to these women’s pensions; it would only ease the situation for them.

Everyone in this room will know of the tireless campaigners fighting for justice for the nearly 4 million women born in the 1950s who are affected by the pension changes. They are particularly active in Coventry, but are also active nationally, and I will take this chance to congratulate them on their work so far, because it has been a long, hard road for many of these women. Many have written to me, describing how helpful a bus pass would be to them. I recognise that every little helps, but a free bus pass would not be the solution to the issue as a whole, as I have already stated.

The pension changes were rushed through the House, and the impact of the legislation has been colossal. It gave those affected no time to plan for their retirement. Women who were expecting to retire in a few years began to wind down at work, working fewer days, or left their career entirely, knowing that they could afford to take time off, as they would soon be in receipt of their state pension—or so they thought.

Stephen Lloyd (Eastbourne) (Ind): I appreciate all the work that the hon. Gentleman has done on this issue; I have often been with him in the Chamber. He is making a very important point. Does he agree that the cost of providing bus passes would be negligible, but they would make a difference to a lot of WASPI women—Women Against State Pension Inequality? The reality, however, is that the Department for Work and Pensions needs to be investigated by the Parliamentary and Health Service Ombudsman, because of its lack of adequate communication all those years ago, in the 1990s.

Mr Cunningham: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that intervention. As I understand it, a number of WASPI women or women born in the early 1950s have submitted complaints and given evidence to the parliamentary ombudsman, but we do not know the outcome of that yet; we will have to wait and see.

The state pension is not a benefit, or a lottery win that people get once they retire. The state pension is the return of money that people—in this case, women—have paid into the system throughout their working life. The worst-affected women have lost out on tens of thousands of pounds and will retire six years later than they expected.
Last month, the High Court was sympathetic to the 1950s women, but ultimately ruled that they had not been discriminated against. However, the pace at which the changes have taken place certainly puts them at a particular disadvantage compared with men. These women have already suffered considerable inequalities and, in some cases, sexism in the workplace. They would have entered the workplace in the 1960s and ’70s. At that time, women were openly discriminated against. They were refused promotions and refused adequate pay for skilled work. In some cases they were refused maternity rights, and in other cases those rights were non-existent. Those factors mean that many of these women are already at a financial disadvantage.

Mike Hill (Hartlepool) (Lab): My hon. Friend is a true champion of this cause. Does he agree that it is a great irony that many of the women who are suffering hardship as a consequence of the pension inequality will themselves be working in organisations such as bus companies, when they should be benefitting from a free bus pass from them?

Mr Cunningham: I fully agree. The factors that I have set out mean that many of these women are already at a financial disadvantage. The Conservatives’ changes to the state pension age only add to that.

The WASPI women have put up an excellent fight against the injustices, but the Government have refused to admit their mistakes or address the problem. The May Administration and now the Johnson Administration have refused to compensate these women for the money that they have lost out on. I note that the Prime Minister, when he was campaigning to be Prime Minister, acknowledged that there was an injustice there, and that it should be put right, but so far we have seen no action. Instead, we have a general election. It will be interesting to see what he does afterwards.

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is being very generous about interventions. He is making an excellent case. Does he agree that one of the biggest injustices was that this was supposed to be a gradual change yet in reality it is a cliff edge? People either get the bus pass or they do not. Many people are having to wait five years for something that, if they had been born a few months earlier, they would have got automatically. Does my hon. Friend agree that that is a problem?

Mr Cunningham: It is a problem, but an additional point is that central Government could fund the bus passes and not leave that to local authorities. We all know that at the moment local authorities are cash-strapped, to say the least. I will not go down that road, but I emphasise that the Government should compensate local authorities for the bus passes.

Gordon Marsden (Blackpool South) (Lab): My hon. Friend is making a very sound, thoughtful and definite case. Can he tell us what the Government have already done to address that?

Mr Cunningham: The Government must provide the necessary funds to ensure that all 1950s women can enjoy a free bus pass. This concession is small, and by no means replaces the tens of thousands of pounds that 1950s women have lost. However, constituents have written to me to describe the benefits that it would bring them. Many of these women are now unemployed, living off savings or supported by their spouse—and that is not to mention the women who are widows and do not have a spouse to support them.

Hugh Gaffney (Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill) (Lab): This is a really important issue for WASPI women. All we are asking for on their behalf is a bus pass. It seems to me that there are comments attacking the older generation now. People want to take their free TV licence off them, for example. The WASPI women are suffering financial hardship. These people have worked and paid taxes all their life. They do not ask for a lot, and I fully support the provision of free bus passes to the WASPI women.

Mr Cunningham: I do not disagree with my hon. Friend.

Mr Paul Sweeney (Glasgow North East) (Lab/Co-op): I pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s amazing contribution, and thank him for his tutelage. I wish him all the best in his retirement.

On the point about working-age women who will not get this benefit at the age when they expected to get their pension, many of those women, including in my constituency, still have to work, because they have no other option, even though they may work in manually intensive jobs and suffer from disabilities. They cannot walk great distances and they do not drive, so they rely on public transport, which is a cost to them. They have to work for extra years. Surely this would help them, and is better than letting them suffer further financial detriment while the fight for justice goes on.
Mr Cunningham: I agree wholeheartedly. For women who are isolated, live on their own and do not have children, the bus pass is a means of communicating with the outside world. Without it, they find themselves trapped at home, friendless in some instances. People living on their own is a major issue in this country.

Luke Pollard (Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport) (Lab/Co-op): There are 8,000 WASPI women in Plymouth, but many doughty campaigners will not get a free bus pass, even if the Minister agrees to one, because they died before they received pension justice. A lot of WASPI women in Plymouth need medical attention, and public transport is their only way of accessing it. Does my hon. Friend agree that the Minister could do a good deal for the WASPI women in the general election by assuring us that they will get a free bus pass? That would be a step towards getting pension justice.

Mr Cunningham: I agree. We could go a step further. I do not know if the Minister has any input on the Conservative manifesto, but if he has, my hon. Friend has just given him a good idea to put in it. Free travel around their towns and cities would allow 1950s women to save a great deal of money on travel while in the limbo period between their working life and the point at which they will receive their state pension.

There are many benefits to bus passes for pensioners. A bus pass combats isolation and tackles loneliness, as I have mentioned. The cost of childcare is so high that many 1950s women in Coventry South and across the nation have become daytime carers for their grandchildren, and in some instances they care for their spouse, too. A free bus pass would allow them to give their grandchildren meaningful and exciting days out. In my constituency, these women will benefit from taking the bus pass to medical appointments, as my hon. Friend the Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) just mentioned, to avoidastronomically high hospital car park charges. Car park charges are another big issue; they affect not only the WASPI women, but medical staff. At some hospitals, the staff have to pay their own car parking charges, which has an impact on their salary.

Everyone will benefit from giving the 1950s women free bus passes. Pensioners’ cash-spending power is a huge issue; they affect not only the WASPI women, but medical staff. The use of buses ensures that services remain in place and of a good standard. Public transport is important for tackling air pollution caused by cars.

In summary, I call on the Government to provide local authorities with the necessary funds to ensure that the 1950s women, who have been treated so badly, receive the small concession of a bus pass at the age at which they were due to retire before the 2011 changes. The Government do not seem interested in providing that. However, when the Minister replies, I am sure he will tell us that he is putting the idea in his manifesto. While the Government refuse to compensate the 1950s women, I hope that they will afford the 1950s women the small compensation of a bus pass. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): On behalf of all hon. Members, I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on what is perhaps the last debate he will initiate in this House. He has been a faithful servant in this place since 1992. I have had the privilege of serving on Select Committees with him. I know he has also served on the Panel of Chairs. Along with other hon. Members, I wish you a very long, successful and happy retirement.

The Minister of State, Department for Transport (George Freeman): Thank you, Sir Christopher, for the chance to serve under your chairmanship. I echo your justifiably warm comments about the hon. Member for Coventry South (Mr Cunningham). It is a pleasure for me to make my first appearance as the newly created Minister for the Future of Transport, but it is also a real pleasure to pay tribute to the hon. Gentleman. In my 10 years here, I have seen the quality, calibre and tenacity of the representation that he has given to the people of Coventry South. I am aware that this may be his last debate. He has given 50 years of public service, including as a city councillor leading the council and as an MP since 1992. Whoever returns in December, this House will miss the hon. Gentleman for his contributions.

My constituency is affected by the pension changes. It defies the stereotype of Norfolk as the playground for the golden Range Rovers from Chelsea to go to the coast. Mid Norfolk is a low-income, largely blue-collar, rural constituency. I well appreciate and understand the issues that the hon. Gentleman has raised, and the importance of concessionary fares on public transport and these pension reforms.

I want to set the scene by reminding everyone why these reforms were necessary. First, they reflected changes in average life expectancy. When the pension system was created, life expectancy was decades younger than today, when it is going up by about a year every decade. These are substantial changes to our workplaces and in the demography of our nation.

Changing the state pension age was a difficult but, in my view, necessary decision. It was necessary not least because we had to deal, in 2010, as a coalition Government, with the horrendous Budget deficit that we inherited. To remind those who are not familiar, the Government at the time were borrowing £1 of every £4 they were spending. Some very tough decisions had to be made. It is worth remembering that these changes were part of recognising some incredible and welcome changes in the workplace of modern Britain. Women now rightly enjoy—it is long overdue—the chance to fulfil careers based on equality in the workplace and to work long, healthy lives, and to enjoy the opportunities that have been dominated by men for too long. That is part of what the reforms were about. However, I totally accept, as I have with my constituents, that where there is a change or threshold in any benefit, concessionary travel in pension situation, there will be people who are caught at the margins or the cut-off point. That is what has happened in this case.

I would not be doing my job if I did not point out that women who reached the state pension age in 2016 will have received, on average, more state pension over their lifetime than women ever have before. Furthermore, if we had not equalised the state pension age, women would be expected to spend on average more than 40% of their adult lives in forced retirement. There are two sides to this coin.
On the suddenness of the change, although many women in my constituency were surprised in 2010-11—as I am sure they were in the hon. Gentleman's—the changes have been coming. The Pensions Act 1995 included plans to increase the women's state pension age from 60 to 65, to align with men. The Pensions Act 2011 moved the state pension age for both men and women to 66. As he signalled, the High Court ruled in favour of the Government in its judicial review ruling of 3 October.

Mr Jim Cunningham: I would need to check it out, but I understand that there may be an appeal on that ruling, so I do not think that the matter is finished.

George Freeman: There may well be an appeal, but I obviously cannot comment on it. I simply make the point that the appeal will be against the ruling in favour of the Government.

On concessionary travel, we all know that for many people the concessionary bus pass can be an absolute lifeline, providing access to work, public services, healthcare, education and, particularly in rural areas, to the very fabric of community and the fabric of active and healthy societies. That is why the Government continue to support concessionary bus travel to the tune of £1 billion a year through local authorities in the UK, to try and ensure that no older or disabled person in England is prevented from travelling by bus for reasons of cost alone. However, I accept that we must go further, and I will set out shortly what the Government will do.

Stephen Lloyd: As the Minister knows, one of the challenges with bus passes is that there is a bit of a postcode lottery: they vary between cities and rural areas. In the spirit of positivity that the Minister spoke about, will the Government make any proposals to ensure that people get the same level of bus pass across the piece, so that WASPI women in rural areas will not suffer more than they would if they lived in London?

George Freeman: The hon. Gentleman makes a very interesting point; will he drop me a line about it? As he knows, I am a champion for rural areas and tackling rural inequality, and I will be looking at what we need to do in our new bus package, which I will describe shortly, to ensure that rural areas do not suffer.

In April last year, we announced a change in the legislation to protect the concessionary travel scheme in its current form so that it can continue to provide free travel for eligible older and disabled people for years to come. I should point out that equalising the age difference between men and women removed the anomalous situation in which non-disabled citizens of working age received free bus passes.

To mitigate the effect of the state pension age changes on the people worst affected, Parliament has already legislated for a £1.1 billion compensation package, which reduced the proposed increase in state pension age for more than 450,000 of the hardest-hit men and women. That means that no woman will see her pension age change by more than 18 months relative to the 1995 Act timetable. I accept that that does not deal with all the issues that the hon. Member for Coventry South raised, but for me that is really important. Some of the constituents I have spoken to are among the most seriously affected, and the idea of the package is that it will help at least to substantially mitigate the impact on them.

In addition, the Government are committed to improving the outlook for older workers. We are helping many of the people who had planned to retire but now work, to get back into work, including by removing many of the barriers that they may face. To enable older people to work for longer, as many want to, we have reformed the legislation to remove the default retirement age, which means that people are no longer forced to retire at an arbitrary age. We have also extended the right to request flexible working to all with 26 weeks' continuous employment, which means that people can propose and discuss a flexible working requirement to suit their needs.

Alongside those significant legislative reforms, we have been successfully challenging negative perceptions about older workers through a major programme, Fuller Working Lives, which is led by the Department for Work and Pensions. We have appointed Andy Briggs as the business champion for older workers, to spearhead the Government's work to support employers in retaining, retraining and recruiting older workers, to actively promote the benefits of older workers to employers across England, and to influence them both strategically and with practical advice. I am not being pat when I point out that the hon. Member for Coventry South is a walking embodiment of the agility, impact and leadership that people can provide in their senior years. There are many people in this country who have a lot to give, in Parliament and in society, and we want to help and encourage them.

There is strong demand and competing claims for concessionary fares. There are many calls on the Government for extensions to the statutory concessionary bus travel scheme for important groups, including young people in search of work, jobseekers and carers, as well as those who are affected by the changes in the state pension age. Each of those groups may have a different and engaging case for access to cheaper travel, but if the Government are to protect the current scheme, which costs £1 billion a year, we must ensure that it is financially sustainable. With that in mind, I will shortly announce, as part of my reforms in my new role, a series of changes to the way in which we tackle demand-responsive bus travel in rural areas.

Concessionary travel legislation gives all local authorities in England the power to introduce local concessions in addition to their statutory obligations, so that authorities that have a particular problem can deal with it. I am delighted that that has happened in the west midlands, which includes the constituency of the hon. Member for Coventry South: the West Midlands Combined Authority, led by its excellent Mayor, Andy Street, has introduced a women's concessionary travel scheme that gives free off-peak bus and tram travel to women who live in the west midlands and were born between March and November 1954. More than 9,000 women across the region are set to benefit. Lest anyone should think that I am being politically partial, let me say that a similar scheme has been put in place by Mayor Andy Burnham in Greater Manchester, and that schemes that offer free bus travel to residents aged 60 and over exist in London and Merseyside. Local leaders can, and in some cases do, put additional measures in place.

Luke Pollard: I am grateful that the Minister has set out the fact that that can happen, and that it is a good thing when it does. Has he considered carrying out a
cost-benefit analysis, looking at the benefits to society from giving WASPI women the free bus pass that he so praises in the west midlands and in Manchester?

George Freeman: I am grateful for that excellent question. In my new role I am looking not just at that issue but at the costs and benefits of widening access to bus and public transport for people in areas where it can tackle disconnection and help to drive up productivity. In my constituency, and possibly in the hon. Gentleman’s, many communities are quite cut off and isolated from the very exciting areas that are creating jobs and have zero unemployment. Cambridge is 40 miles down the road from Mid Norfolk, but I have many constituents who cannot get there, so they cannot get those jobs. As part of my role, I am looking at the cost-benefit ratio for the Treasury of having better travel, better training and better skills.

The Government have committed to seriously transform bus services across the country for the first time in a generation. I therefore welcome, as I hope colleagues across the House will, the announcement of our £220 million package, “A better deal for bus users”. Whatever else one might think about politics in this country at the moment, I welcome the fact that we have a Mayor as Prime Minister—someone who not only gets buses, has designed them and paints them in his spare time, but deeply gets the importance of public transport and interconnected transport for modern connected places. That is, in no small part, why we are introducing our major bus reform, with £50 million to deliver Britain’s first all-electric-bus town or city; £30 million in extra bus funding, paid directly to local authorities to enable them to improve bus services and restore lost services; and £20 million to support demand-responsive services in rural and suburban areas.

On the point that the hon. Member for Plymouth, Sutton and Devonport (Luke Pollard) raised a moment ago, as Minister for the Future of Transport I am working actively on whether we can take a more intelligent place-based approach. When we look at a county—Norfolk, in my case—or a city, instead of asking how best to spend our money on subsidising bus services, we should ask a different question: “How best can we help the people in this area who need help to get to work or to get access to public services?” I am absolutely sure—indeed, I have seen it working—that by using digitalisation or simple telephone demand systems, we can make it easier for people to log on and signal where they need to go the next day, and we can ensure that we provide for a mixed economy. Whether it is for two or three people in a car-share, 10 people in a minivan, or 20 or 30 people on a bus, we can do much better in using technology to provide smarter public and community-based travel and support services.

I genuinely thank the hon. Member for Coventry South for raising this important matter, for his intervention. As the chair of that group, I recognise the various different communities we can identify Gujarati individuals, as well as the Gujarati community at large, contributing effectively in different spheres in our society, and that we should respect that?

Mr Virendra Sharma (Ealing, Southall) (Lab): I congratulate the hon. Gentleman on securing this debate, on a subject that has so far been missing in the Commons debate structure. Does he agree that although we do not have much data, in our constituencies and our local communities we can identify Gujarati individuals, as well as the Gujarati community at large, contributing effectively in different spheres in our society, and that we should respect that?

Bob Blackman: I thank the hon. Gentleman, who is the chair of the Indo-British all-party parliamentary group, for his intervention. As the chair of that group, I would naturally raise such a subject and I also know full well how much work he does in his constituency to integrate the various different communities, and I recognise what he has said.

The Gujarati community has integrated so well in Britain because of their religious/spiritual leanings and their ethos of hard work and networking across the community, which we should celebrate.

Most of the Gujaratis in the UK—not all, but most of them—are of Hindu origin and practice Hinduism. All of us who celebrated Diwali last Sunday know that it lasts from about 1 September to 31 January, given the celebrations that go on over that period, but of course last Sunday was the holy day. And we just celebrated the Hindu new year on Monday, so a new year gives us a new opportunity to celebrate what Gujaratis have done here. I wish all those who have been celebrating, “Noutan Varsha Abhinandan”, which is Gujarati for “happy new year”.

First, perhaps, we should consider the state of Gujarat. It is obviously a state in India, which is located on the western coast, near the Arabian sea and bordering the south-eastern tip of Pakistan. It is comprised of 33 districts, it covers just under 76,000 square miles, and its population is approximately 69 million people.
The state, as we know it now, came into being in 1960, when the state of Bombay was revised, and then divided into Gujarat and Maharashtra. So it is a relatively young state in India. The capital city is Gandhinagar. The city of Ahmedabad, which is also in the state, is clearly one of the economic powerhouses of India right now. It is a major population centre and, of course, among the most crucial textile hubs in India.

Figures from the relevant Indian ministry suggest that Gujarat produces 7.69% of the entire GDP of India, so that Gujarat is ranked fifth of the 33 states and union territories of India in that regard. In terms of religious breakdown, which I mentioned earlier, the latest figures show that about 89% of the population are Hindu, 9% are Muslim, 1% follow Jainism, 0.5% follow Christianity, 0.2% follow Sikhism and 0.1% follow Buddhism.

It is fair to say that when Gujarat was created as a state, it was very run-down; in fact, it was a desert. It did not have the economic power that it now has. In fact, it is now recognised as being the economic powerhouse of India, not least because its chief minister between 2001 and 2014 was none other than Narendra Modi, who went on to become the Prime Minister of India and is now delivering for the whole of India what he delivered previously for the state of Gujarat. Under Modi’s premiership in Gujarat, the finances and wellbeing of the state were rapidly improved, in terms of the economy, the lifestyle enjoyed by its citizens and the other indicators that show Gujarat is a vibrant state. And clearly he is doing the same thing for India as a whole.

Most of the Gujaratis in the UK came here in the 1970s; there were Gujaratis who came here before that, but in general Gujaratis came here from east Africa in the 1970s. That started when Idi Amin became dictator in Uganda. Although the Gujarati community in Uganda were delivering the economic benefits of the Gujarati people to the country, Amin took against them. That was because, as a despot, he persecuted ethnic, religious and political groups with whom he did not agree. He deliberately went after the Asian and European communities in Uganda, and approximately 80,000 Asians who had come to Uganda, who were mainly Gujaratis, became the prime target of his blitz on minorities.

Of those 80,000, around 30,000 moved to the UK. I am very proud of the fact that when Idi Amin decided to evict the Gujaratis and other Indians from Uganda, it was Ted Heath, a Conservative Prime Minister, who took those people in and welcomed them. At the same time, Indira Gandhi, who was the Prime Minister of India, refused to take them back. I think that demonstrates how this country has always welcomed immigrants who will participate fully in our country.

Nevertheless, we should remember how some in Britain welcomed those people who came here. In particular, I think of Leicester City Council, which chose to put adverts in the Ugandan newspapers, saying, “Please don’t come to Leicester”. The result is that the Gujarati population now in Leicester is about 15,000, so that advertising was clearly not very effective. And good on the Gujaratis who went there, despite what they were being told.

I was at school when the first of those people arrived and I remember that most of those I met were—I have to say—a bit disorientated. They arrived in snow, which they were not used to. However, they had better English than we had, they were better educated than we were and they were very smart. But they were bewildered by the fact that the climate I met them then are still my friends today. That demonstrates how they came in, participated in the work of the UK and moved ahead straightaway.

Dr Matthew Offord (Hendon) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend on securing the debate. Does he agree that the decision by Idi Amin was certainly his country’s loss and our country’s gain? At the time, people would often criticise and even abuse Gujaratis for being shop owners. However, the reality is that they not only contributed to the economy, looked after their families and paid taxes, but had a significant impact on the rest of society, by bringing about the changes to the trading laws—particularly the Sunday trading laws—that we all now enjoy.

Bob Blackman: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. Remember, when these people were expelled from Uganda, they were told to leave everything behind; all they had was literally what they could carry and about £50 in their pockets. They were not coming here with riches and they were not necessarily able to enjoy the fruits of their labour in Uganda. Equally, this movement of people happened not only in Uganda but in Tanzania, Kenya, Ethiopia and other parts of east Africa, where people recognised that such treatment was going to happen.

When Gujaratis arrived here, the host communities were not always welcoming: I have already mentioned Leicester. However—this demonstrates one of the great characteristics of Gujaratis—they spotted an opportunity. If people remember, back in the 1970s our shops would open at 9 am, they would shut at 5 pm or 6 pm, they would close early on Wednesdays, and they were certainly not open on Sundays. Those Gujaratis clearly saw that there was an opportunity, and they went in and bought those shops, borrowing money to do so, and they ran them from about 6 am until 11 pm. They worked hard and they saved money. They wanted to save that money so that their children would have a better life than they had, which is another of the great characteristics of this community, which we have in our presence and do not recognise enough.

That work also meant that the Gujarati community very quickly got to learn the language. If they were not abreast of English already, they certainly came up to speed quickly. That meant that they could provide, as an extended family, a home for their brothers, sisters, wives, children and so on within one home and continue that process. I am glad that the process continues to this day. One of the key characteristics of the Gujarati community is their extended family ties.

I will go through what I consider to be some of the great characteristics of the Gujarati community. They believe in hard work and effort. In other words, they do not rely on state benefits; they get on with the hard work, earn their money and then use it for their families and communities. They believe in enterprise and free-market thinking. It does not get much more free-market than taking over a corner shop and turning it into an outrageous success, which has happened for a number of UK businesses.
I mentioned integration. Gujaratis have ultimate respect for authority, as we can see from their obedience to the rule of the law. According to the latest statistics, released at the end of March 2018, only 343 Hindus were in prison—Gujaratis are predominantly Hindus—out of a total prison population of nearly 83,000. That demonstrates that Gujaratis are far more likely to be victims of crime than criminals. It is their obedience to the law that often means that their contribution to the community goes unnoticed.

Gujaratis also have a great habit of looking after mum and dad. Rather than putting them in a home or saying, “Sorry, we can’t cope,” they will look after them in their own home and ensure that they are looked after in their old age. The whole of society can learn from that. Around 37% of my constituents are from the Gujarati community. Often when I am going about, particularly during the daytime, the grandparents will be looking after the children while mum and dad are at work. That is a great symbol of the extended family and how it helps mums, dads, grandparents and children to stay together as one big family.

I mentioned the desire for education and how important that is. It is very clear that where there are Gujarati families the standard of education in schools shoots up, because they are demanding. They insist that their children get the best possible education. Equally, where Hindu and other faith schools have been set up, demands for improved education are made.

The Gujarati community add value to our community at large, and I am delighted that they have done so, but often they do not speak up enough. My one criticism is whether they have learned the lessons from their forefathers and foremothers of what happened in east Africa, where their positions were taken for granted and ignored. I often say, “You must speak up and speak out for the contribution that you make, and make sure that your hard work achieves recognition.”

We should also pay tribute to the number of Hindu temples—mandirs—that have been created by the Gujarati community in the UK. At the last count, there were some 150 mandirs in the UK. I am pleased that in my short time in politics I not only was able to attend the foundation stone laying of Neasden temple, but enabled the community to buy the site for the Ealing Road temple. I was present at the inauguration of both those fantastic UK mandirs. I have also been to many other mandirs that have been set up over the past 30 years. It is important to recognise that the mandir is not just a temple. I was present at the inauguration of both those temples—mandirs—that have been set up over the past 30 years. It is fantastic UK mandirs. I have also been to many other temples in the community. Often when I am going about, particularly during the daytime, the grandparents will be looking after the children while mum and dad are at work. That is a great symbol of the extended family and how it helps mums, dads, grandparents and children to stay together as one big family.

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There are enormous numbers of Hindu festivals throughout the year—hon. Members will know that because we get invited to them, and we celebrate with the community. It is important that during those times the community is warm and welcoming, and brings people in. That is a message for all religions across the country. If they are welcoming, people will understand their religion, and that will end the myths that often build up about particular religions.

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): The hon. Gentleman is making some excellent points. I do not know whether he has yet had the pleasure of coming to the Glasgow Hindu mandir, which recently had a celebration that epitomised what he was saying. Worshipers were celebrating in Kelvingrove Park, with the bands and drums, really bringing people in to enjoy it and embrace it. Does he welcome that kind of community activity?

Bob Blackman: I do. The hon. Lady may not know that there is a bagpipe band that celebrates and is normally present at the Kingsbury mandir. It comes to a range of functions. In fact, I was with the hon. Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma) only recently where that band led the parade.

Mr Virendra Sharma: It is interesting that the hon. Gentleman has raised one aspect of the community. The community also includes very skilled craftsmen and women who bring their professions into better repute. As he said, there is a focus on education, and families encourage their children to go into professions such as accountancy, medicine and the law. However, the community are not only in Wembley or Harrow; the hon. Gentleman has visited temples in my constituency to see the services that they provide and the community centres that they have set up. Those temples are not only for worshipping deities; they have an integration aspect, with different cultures brought together to provide services to society—social services. He mentioned some of those services, but does he agree that temples provide other social services too?

Bob Blackman: I do. It is clear that the first generation had to do the difficult jobs of taking on the economy and building up their family economies. Subsequently, all the families I have come across want their sons and daughters to be doctors, dentists, accountants or lawyers. They want their children to be professionals and to go on and succeed in life—and, in the main, they do. Gujaratis have become some of the most successful businesspeople across the United Kingdom, and some of the most important professionals, be it in our national health service or in other guises.

I will also mention the Gujarati community’s contribution to charity. All the mandirs and community centres are created through voluntary contributions. If they borrow money, they pay it back, but they do not depend on taxpayer money for the creation of any of those centres. That is another thing for which we can be grateful to the Gujarati community. They do not demand money and they do not expect it, but, boy oh boy, do they manage to raise it in their communities.

Let me end with a couple of questions for the Minister. I mentioned that we need a clear way to capture data to measure the immense contribution made not only by the Gujarati community, but by others. There have been debates in this place on the Sikh community and others, and we must ensure that we capture the data in an appropriate way. Several of us have campaigned to get Gujarati as a language retained on the national curriculum for those people who want it. Having that data enables us to demonstrate the importance of having that language in our schools, if people want to raise that point. Equally, retaining Gujarati as an A-level and GCSE qualification is important to that process.

The Gujarati community can be used as a prime example of how a community can come to this country and integrate. We should highlight the contribution it
has made, possibly to show other communities that this is the way that they can not only come to this country and make a success of it, but organise appropriately; to have their own religion and celebrate their culture, but still integrate within the host community. The Gujarati community is a shining example to all communities that they can do so. In his reply, could the Minister shed some light on how we can use their example as a means of saying to different communities who come to this country and make it their home that this is an ideal way of doing so, and how we can celebrate what those people have done and the contribution they make?

4.51 pm

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I find myself in the unusual situation of agreeing with most of the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman)’s contribution. It is a most uncomfortable experience.

Bob Blackman: It will not last.

Gareth Thomas: I am sure it will not last beyond today.

On behalf of the Gujarati community that I am proud to represent, I wanted to add to the list of requests made of the Minister. The first is about flight links to Gujarat. There is a direct flight from Heathrow to Gujarat, but given the scale of the travel needs of Gujaratis in the UK—as I understand it, we are the third largest home for the Gujarati diaspora worldwide—anything that the UK Government could do, perhaps on the back of discussions about the third runway, to encourage more direct flights to Gujarat would be extremely helpful to many of my constituents.

Turning to the issue of visas, many of my constituents still experience difficulties helping their relatives who want to visit, particularly at Diwali. Perhaps the consulate in Ahmedabad could offer advice sessions to the family members of our Gujarati community about what they need to do to have a decent chance of their applications being processed. The last figures I saw suggested that over 60,000 applications for visas from India were being turned down, and given the size of the Gujarati community, I suspect that many of those—the vast bulk of them—are from people hoping to come from Gujarat to visit relatives here.

The hon. Member for Harrow East mentioned the teaching of Gujarati. It is time that we considered the teaching, and in these hard times, it is increasingly expensive to provide that teaching and book the facilities for it.

The last of my main asks is this: I do not understand why there are not more trade missions to Gujarat, to take advantage of our substantial business links with it. Gujarat is the economic powerhouse of India, and we should not be frightened of turning to the talents of British Gujaratis to unlock further business opportunities for our country in Gujarat.

I was disappointed at the Government’s unwillingness to support the campaign for Diwali, and indeed Eid, to be recognised as a national holiday. If the Government are not willing to reconsider their opposition to making those days public holidays, they should, at the very least, have conversations with business organisations to encourage businesses to be sympathetic to requests for time off on those days. Those are the most important spiritual days for the Gujarati community, so that would be extremely helpful. As the Minister may know, the Jains and Zoroastrians who form part of the Gujarati community in the UK do not get proper recognition on the census. Both have been running campaigns to get those faiths on to the 2021 census, so that their religion can be properly respected, and it would be good if the Minister would use his influence to unlock a more common-sense response from the Office for National Statistics.

I view the Gujaratis in my community through the businesses and services that they provide, beginning with the garage directly opposite my office, which is run by the Halai family, who came over from east Africa but had a home in the Kutch area of Gujarat. They have provided jobs to people in my constituency and provided a much-appreciated service through their garage. They are active in the Shree Kutch Leva Patel Community, which does so much in north-west London; I wish its premises were based in my constituency, but sadly, they are in Northolt. The SKLPC has secured planning permission for a fantastic new India Gardens project, and I wish its trustees well in turning their vision into a reality.

Also linked to SKLPC are the Vekaria family, who run the Vascroft business—contractors that build temples, hotels and many other things. They employ huge numbers of people and are well known in the building community. That business was set up by two brothers from east Africa, but again with huge links to Gujarat, in January 1977. It is a family business still; it has great values, and it is based in Park Royal. All us Members from north-west London have constituents who work for Vascroft.

There is also Sandip Ruparelia, who has links to the International Siddhashram Shakti Centre in Harrow—which, I suppose, is my home temple in my constituency—and to the ISKCON Foundation at Bhaktivedanta Manor. His family, too, was originally based in Tanzania, but had strong links to Gujarat. He arrived in the UK in March 1980, and now runs a huge business, providing banqueting facilities among other things. Perhaps crucially, in the context of the debate about the future of our public services that we will have over the course of the next six weeks, he also runs an important care home service, providing much-valued services to the elderly in my constituency and beyond. He employs 2,500 staff and generates substantial tax revenues for our economy. He is another example of a member of the Gujarati community who recognises his responsibilities to the country in which he lives, but has also kept his links to Gujarat and is hugely proud of them.

The Dhamecha family are part of the Lohana community. Again, they have strong links to Gujarat and have helped the Lohana community in the UK, which is part of the Gujarati diaspora, to set up two centres, both of which, I am pleased to say, are in my constituency. That is much appreciated. Pradip Dhamecha and his family run a huge cash and carry business, which generates substantial tax revenues for the UK economy.
The Solanki family are a north-west London Gujarati family who originally came from east Africa. The father, Mr Solanki, came over in 1964. They run the Asian Media Group. The business is now run by the second generation, with a third generation of Gujaratis actively involved in taking that successful media business forward. All the individuals I have referenced are fiercely proud of their Hindu faith and have links to many of the mandirs, be they part of the Swaminarayan family or other temples in the area.

I also acknowledge the contribution of Gujarati Muslims in my constituency. The superb Dr Merali, a local GP and entrepreneur, is a trustee of the Mahfil Ali mosque in north Harrow. He provides hugely important public services as a GP and through his work with nurseries. He is also engaged with a series of other fundraising projects to support those in need in the UK and back home in Gujarat.

I am privileged to host the headquarters of the Zoroastrian community in the UK in Rayners Lane in my constituency. It is hugely proud of its links to Gujarat, and the fact that the first MP from an ethnic minority background was a Gujarati Parsi. Again, we should acknowledge the huge contribution that the Zoroastrians have made, as part of the Gujarati community, to life in the UK.

All those Gujaratis, in different ways, support my seven reasonable asks of the Government, which I hope the Minister will take seriously in his response.

Sir Christopher Chope (in the Chair): We will start the wind-ups at 10 past, so I hope that the next two speakers are suitably brief.

5.2 pm

Neil O’Brien (Harborough) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) in the warmest terms on securing the first ever debate in the Commons about the role of Gujaratis. The story of the Gujarati community in Britain is inspirational. He has already mentioned the Gujaratis’ incredible get-up-and-go enterprising qualities. Many of them, particularly in my constituency, fled here from the murderous Idi Amin with nothing but the shirts on their backs, and they have built incredible businesses and transformed the local economy. If I were to name all of them in my constituency, we would be here for days.

The Gujaratis have made an incredible social contribution to our area—they are social entrepreneurs. As part of the wider Indian community in my constituency, they run countless voluntary groups, community groups and charities, with a particular emphasis on helping and caring for older people. It is always wonderful, when I go to Gujarati homes, to see the grandma and grandpa seated with great respect at the end of the table. That is a wonderful part of the culture that we could all learn from.

The Gujarati community is a patriotic community that has become integrated and part of the great tapestry of this country. I enjoy the cultural contribution that it has made to my constituency; there have been huge Diwali celebrations in recent weeks in Leicestershire. I particularly enjoyed dancing at the Navratri celebrations at Gartree High School in my constituency. As hon. Members might imagine, I am a terrible dancer, but it is a warm and forgiving community, so it was wonderful to be there.

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): I pay tribute to the Surrey Hindu Cultural Association, which is based in Woking. It is not a huge community, but it puts on the most amazing Diwali festival every year, for which all the citizens of Woking are grateful. That also takes place across many other constituencies, and we pay tribute to the community for that.

Neil O’Brien: That is extremely nice to hear.

What more can we do? I am always working to make sure that everybody is looked after in our community, which is one reason I support drives to get more tissue and blood donations, which we are desperately short of, from Gujarati and other Indian communities. I also work to improve community life and relationships between the different communities in my constituency, which is why I am pressing my local councils to try to find space for a Hindu community centre. We have lots of churches, a great mosque and a wonderful gurdwara, but people still have to go into the city to go to a temple. I would love to find something to house all those wonderful voluntary groups in my constituency.

To summarise, the story of the Gujaratis in Britain is a story of enterprise, strong family life, charity and strong voluntary commitments. It is a story about a group of patriotic people who have come to this great country and put down deep roots.

5.6 pm

Naz Shah (Bradford West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. Like my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas), it is unusual for me to agree with the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman), but I thank him for securing this timely debate.

I have a small, minority Gujarati community in my constituency, predominantly of Muslim heritage. I take this opportunity to acknowledge the contribution of the Gujarati community to my constituency, and to associate myself with the comments about the community’s contribution, regardless of faith, to Great Britain. As the hon. Gentleman said, there are lots of inspirational stories about the community from across the country, and it is no different in Bradford West. The community makes up almost half the Indian community by size; it is diverse in religious belief, but united by language, heritage and history.

Many of the Gujarati community came to the UK as migrants from not just India but east Africa. Some were tragically forced out of countries such as Uganda by the likes of Idi Amin. Many overcame struggles and challenges on their journey to the UK, as well as the racism that was often faced by first-generation Gujaratis on their arrival, to become leaders in our community. Many hon. Members have mentioned the huge economic contribution that the community makes. Its long history in trading was transformed into entrepreneurial efforts, as we have heard. There was a revolution in the way that Gujaratis turned corner shops into empires, and built on that success to become business leaders in the UK.

Second and third-generation Gujaratis treat our ill in hospitals, teach our young people in schools and work at the highest levels of the public and private sectors,
which shows just how important a contribution the community makes to the UK. Whether Hindus, Sikhs, Khojas, Ismailis, Dawoodi Bohras or Sunnis, they have often been at the forefront of charitable work across the UK, especially to support those most in need in the cold winter months.

Leadership and the fight against struggles are attributes woven into the rich history of Gujarati communities. Two of the most prominent leaders who fought British colonialism in India—Muhammed Ali Jinnah, the founding father of Pakistan, and Mahatma Gandhi—have roots connected to Gujarat.

Gujaratis in the UK have held firmly to the lessons of standing up to injustice. One of the best examples of that is from my aunties in the Gujarati community, Jayaben Desai and Yasu Patel, also known as the “strikers in saris”. In 1976, in the face of inequality, poor working conditions and low wages at the Grunwick film processing factory, they took to the streets. When even those who were meant to be supporting their cause had abandoned them, they led a campaign joined by almost 20,000 people.

Jayaben Desai quit her post in the factory in solidarity with her sacked colleague. As she left—I love this bit—the line manager compared her and her colleagues with chattering monkeys. She replied, “What you are running here is not a factory; it is a zoo. But in a zoo there are many types of animals. Some are monkeys who dance on your fingertips; others are lions who can bite your head off. We are the lions, Mr Manager.”

Like those lions, many of us have fought within the Labour movement to make the Labour party the vehicle of change that we see today. I want to show my gratitude to the Gujarati community, because their contribution to the UK makes it a better place for all across this great nation. I particularly thank the Khalifa Centre, which always welcomes me, and the communities in the Quba mosque in my constituency for their contribution to not just business, but faith, humanity and wider society. We are better for it.

5.10 pm

Alison Thewliss (Glasgow Central) (SNP): It is a pleasure to see you in the Chair, Sir Christopher. I pay huge tribute to the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for again bringing us a debate that allows us to think about the many cultures that bring us together as a society, and about their contribution and the special place that each of them has. I thank him very much for his efforts to do that. He set out very well the contribution of the Gujarati community, because their contribution to the UK makes it a better place for all across this great nation. I particularly thank the Khalifa Centre, which always welcomes me, and the communities in the Quba mosque in my constituency for their contribution to not just business, but faith, humanity and wider society. We are better for it.

It was also good to hear from the hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas)—we are stuck between Harrow East and Harrow West in this debate—and the hon. Member for Harborough (Neil O’Brien), who spoke about the Gujarati community’s social and economic contribution. We had a beautiful contribution from the hon. Member for Bradford West (Naz Shah), who spoke so nicely and powerfully about lions of the women’s movement in her part of the world—it was a very interesting and profound story of the contribution that women have made, because that is often not recognised well enough among the good contribution made by the Gujarati community. She also reminded us of their mixed Muslim and Hindu heritage.

Gujaratis are a small but significant part of the communities in Scotland. The 2011 census showed that there were only 878 Gujarati speakers in Scotland, but we value each and every one of them. Some perhaps did not complete the census last time—when we get the new census, it will be interesting to see whether that has changed and whether there are issues of language, as other hon. Members mentioned, and whether there are issues where we have to support the community more to ensure that the younger and older generations do not lose their links with their past and to their original countries of origin, be it east India or parts of Africa from which they fled in the 1970s or came earlier in the 1950s and 1960s, because they are incredibly important in allowing those communities to tell their own stories of where they have come from.

The Gujarati people have made an invaluable contribution to life in Scotland and the UK. We must remember, as the hon. Member for Harrow East mentioned, the challenges that the community faced in coming here. The Gujaratis came at a time when the UK economy was faltering and provided a significant boost to the economy. It certainly undermines any myth that the UK was doing them a favour by allowing them to come here. In fact, it is the other way around—the Gujarati community, and the many communities that make up the UK, have actually done us a huge honour and favour by choosing this country as their home, or by coming here if they had to. We welcome them and say that this is their home. We look forward to future generations building on the great success that the original generation had made.

The hon. Member for Harrow West mentioned visas, which are a huge issue in my constituency. I have many constituents who struggle to get visitor visas, spousal visas or visas to stay if they have come to study. It is a huge issue, and I urge the Minister to look in more detail at the impact that has on community relations and on the way Britain is perceived in the world. Although Scotland has no choice about our immigration system, we are bound by it. We are done down by it, because we cannot welcome people as we would want to. The hostile environment is a huge issue for many of my constituents, who turn up at my constituency surgeries in tears week in, week out, because they cannot get their granny to come and visit, or they cannot have family members come and stay for a while so that they can show off the place they now call home and say, “This is Scotland; come and visit.” It is a huge disappointment every time that happens.

The hon. Member for Harrow West also mentioned the important links to Gujarat and the importance of having flights and facilitating travel the other way as well. As I mentioned in my intervention, the wider Indian community in my Glasgow constituency is growing and vibrant. They are very keen to do things such as have cricket contests in the west end. They had me out playing cricket, which was terrible—I really should not do that, because I am not very good at it. They were very encouraging of that. They had women’s and men’s teams, and they had all kinds of people involved. It is really positive on the whole, and it is good to see such a vibrant community.

I particularly want to mention Piush Patel of the Gujarati Society of Glasgow, which is a non-profit organisation run entirely by volunteers. There was originally
a Gujarati Society in the 1970s, but that committee retired and the new generation have picked it up. They have held a Dandiya celebration for the past seven years, and Navratri is one of their biggest festivals. They said that, during the nine days of Navratri, each night was celebrated with prayers and dancing. Their Facebook page has pictures showing some of those celebrations, which look like a lot of fun. I hope to join them at some point soon, if we are not going to be here so much. The committee has been holding such events and has had a huge turnout. Despite it being a small community, they have sold out, with 250 to 300 tickets for each night when they run the event. They could probably get more people in if they had a bigger hall in which to hold the events.

The influx and number of Gujaratis in Scotland is significant, and they feel as though more people are coming and joining the community. They feel that they have a huge contribution to make, and that having these celebrations is also a good way to reach out to teach people about Gujarati culture, the festivals and, of course, to enjoy the food when they come together.

I welcome the debate that the hon. Member for Harrow East has introduced, and I hope that the Minister will pick up on some of the concerns that have been raised.

5.16 pm

Dr Roberta Blackman-Woods (City of Durham) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship again, Sir Christopher. I congratulate the hon. Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) on securing this really important debate. I also thank him for giving me one last opportunity to respond to a debate from Labour’s Front Bench.

It is really a pleasure to speak to the importance of recognising the contribution that the Gujarati community makes to the UK. I had an opportunity to see this for myself last year when I visited the community of my hon. Friend the Member for Ealing, Southall (Mr Sharma). We had an absolutely wonderful experience, and I thank him and his constituents again for that. I thank all hon. Members who have spoken in the debate, including my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West said, led the strikes in the 1970s against the working conditions of south Asian women in the Grunwick factory, and was chosen for the “Woman’s Hour” power list in 2016; the actor Dev Patel; the cricketer Sameer Patel; and, of course, people here and in the House of Lords with specialisms in political theory and economics. We are very well served. It is paramount that we recognise the unique and special contribution that the Gujarati community makes to this country.

In concluding, I want to raise some quick points with the Minister. We clearly need more information and data about the community, and much better documentation of its positive impact and huge contribution to this country. We also need to solve some of the problems that Gujaratis face in travelling and getting visas for their families.

As has been said, our country and Gujarat state in India have close historical connections. Almost half of the Indian community who now live in the UK are from Gujarat—a population of around 600,000. As we have heard, the journey to the UK for many Gujarati families has not, historically, always been easy or direct. Some Gujaratis came directly from India in the 1950s and 1960s, but most came from east Africa in the 1970s and 1980s, as a response to the terrible events that took place in Uganda and their expulsion. They came here for a better and safer way of life. It is interesting that they settled in a number of places of opportunity in the UK: Leicester, Coventry—the midlands—northern textile towns and here in Greater London.

It is hugely important to recognise the contribution that the Gujarati community has made to the UK in all manners of life—cultural, social and economic. Although the community is diverse and vibrant, with many different traditions and faith backgrounds, including Hindus, Muslims and Jains, they have brought great diversity to our own culture in the realms of music, festivals, dance, quizzing, dress and architecture. Autumn festivals such as Navaratri, which have just passed, bring vibrancy and vigour to our communities, and festivals such as Diwali, which many in the Gujarati community take part in, have become a staple in the British calendar. Gujarati cuisine, with its fantastic use of spices and range of vegetarian dishes, has enriched the shops of many UK high streets.

Buildings such as the Neasden temple—Europe’s first traditional Hindu stone temple, painstakingly carved in Gujarat by more than 1,000 dedicated craftsmen and built by a team of international volunteers in London—have brought a magnificent diversity, too, to our architecture. They have also brought much to our economy and industry and, as has been said, they are well known for their entrepreneurial spirit.

I have heard it said many times that Gujaratis have contributed greatly to the revolution of the British corner shop. That entrepreneurial success is even more commendable when one considers the often severe racism that many migrant communities faced in the 1970s and ‘80s. The hon. Member for Hendon (Dr Offord) made that point well.

At a local level, Gujarati mosque and Hindu temple networks continue to contribute to the UK’s charitable sector. Gujaratis and people of Gujarati descent continue to achieve great success in all manner of industries, from film and television to sports and politics. Picking just a few prominent people of Gujarati descent in the UK highlights the great breadth of the impact that they have had. They include Jayaben Desai, who, as my hon. Friend the Member for Bradford West said, led the strikes in the 1970s against the working conditions of south Asian women in the Grunwick factory, and was chosen for the “Woman’s Hour” power list in 2016; the actor Dev Patel; the cricketer Sameer Patel; and, of course, people here and in the House of Lords with specialisms in political theory and economics. We are very well served. It is paramount that we recognise the unique and special contribution that the Gujarati community makes to this country.

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5.21 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Luke Hall): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Christopher. I thank all hon. Members for their contributions. In particular, I thank my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East (Bob Blackman) for securing the debate and giving me the opportunity to reflect on the significant social, economic, political and cultural contribution made by the Gujarati community in the United Kingdom. Nobody in this House has been a more tireless advocate for the Gujarati community than him. It takes only a visit to his office to see the accolades and gifts of thanks...
from the community in acknowledgement of his hard work on their behalf in his near decade as a Member of Parliament. I offer him my sincere thanks.

I want to take this opportunity to send my best wishes to everyone who celebrated Diwali on Sunday. The festival of light is a special time for all to come together, to share gifts, food and memories, and to draw confidence from the knowledge that, ultimately, good will triumph over evil. That is a message for all time, and Diwali’s enduring values of duty and service resonate with people of all faiths and none.

It is a huge privilege to represent the Government in this debate. There has been such consensus about the issues facing the community and its contribution to British society. It has been fascinating to learn so much from hon. Members. The Gujarati community is renowned for possessing some of the most prized qualities in British society: a formidable work ethic, a strong sense of charity and an unbreakable bond of community. I am delighted to be celebrating its great achievements and contributions to our country.

The Gujarati community has had a long history with Britain, dating back to the 17th century. Trade between Britain and the Gujarati region stretches back centuries, and I am sure it will continue to flourish and strengthen in the decades ahead. The Gujarati community is also responsible for a phenomenal degree of trade within the United Kingdom. Throughout the country, the Gujarati community can be found running businesses at all levels, from hotels to tech start-ups and international conglomerates, but it is at the most local level that the Gujarati community has had its biggest effect on UK business, through many thousands of local shop owners. I remember from my time working in retail, from leaving school to coming to this House, the phenomenal impact that that famous work ethic had on changing opening hours around consumer need in many retail businesses. It helped to transform a quite old-fashioned set of retail laws in this country forever.

Away from the world of numbers and money, it is important to acknowledge the community’s impact on injecting colour and vibrancy into our country. Consider how much duller our country would be without the kind of celebrations that we have seen in recent weeks at Diwali, or the festival of colour. The Gujarati community has helped to transform our social lives and our community through fashion, music and, predominantly, as the hon. Member for City of Durham (Dr Blackman-Woods) said, food. There are 10,000 restaurants in England and Wales alone that serve Indian and Gujarati food. That accounts for two thirds of all the dining experiences in Wales alone that serve Indian and Gujarati food. That is a pleasure to say that the current Home Secretary comes from a Gujarati background.

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Luke Hall: I completely agree. The Home Secretary is, of course, the first ethnic minority woman to hold one of the great offices of state, and the hon. Gentleman is absolutely right to put that on the record. The even more famous members of UK society with Gujarati descent are, of course, our royal family, who were shown by recent DNA testing to have Gujarati ancestry. It is important to put that on the record.

There have been a number of points raised in the debate. I fear that I may not have time to address them all, but I will touch on a couple. First, my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East and a number of other hon. Members raised the issue of data capture and the importance of ensuring that we have the right information to demonstrate the Gujarati community’s contribution. The Government published statistics on Monday detailing the experiences of people from the Indian ethnic community in the UK. This is the first time that that data has been published. Although it focuses on the Indian community as a whole, it provides a valuable insight into the achievements, attainments and contributions of the community. I am very happy to take my hon. Friend’s suggestion away and look at what more can be done.

The hon. Member for Harrow West (Gareth Thomas) raised, I think, seven suggestions that he would like me to take away and look at. Because of the time, I will commit to write to him on all seven, but he made some valid points.

In conclusion—I am giving my hon. Friend the Member for Harrow East very little time to respond—I want to put on the record my thanks, and the thanks of the whole Government and of my Department, to the Gujarati community for its work and its huge contribution to British society and British life.

5.29 pm

Bob Blackman: I thank Members from across the House for participating in this celebration. It is very rare that we get the chance to end a Parliament with such as celebration, so that is what we should do. I will end with this anecdote. People who go into a temple—a mandir—can sometimes see a multimillionaire cleaning...
the statues and the floors, but they will not know that he is a multimillionaire, because he will show no sign of that. I think that is symbolic of the Gujarati community. Question put and agreed to.

Resolved,
That this House has considered the contribution of the Gujarati community to the UK.

5.30 pm
Sitting adjourned.
E-cigarettes

1.30 pm

Norman Lamb (North Norfolk) (LD): I beg to move, That this House has considered the Seventh Report of the Science and Technology Committee, Session 2017-19, E-cigarettes, HC 505, and the Government Response, Cm 9738.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship for the very first time, Sir Henry, in my last appearance in this Chamber, and it has been a pleasure to have you as my constituency next-door neighbour for the last 18 years. I am pleased to have secured a debate on this important work undertaken by my Committee before this Parliament draws to a close. It is great that we have been able to hold the debate in the month of Stoptober, the big anti-smoking initiative, which I think has been successful, and which I remember launching in my time as a Minister, back in the day.

Statistics released by the Office for National Statistics show that in 2018 in England, 14.4% of adults smoked. That represents a significant advance in reducing the prevalence of smoking in our country; ONS figures show that smoking rates in England have fallen every year since 2011. It is important to say that there is one exception to that advance, and it relates to mental ill health—something I care a lot about. People with severe and enduring mental ill health tend to die much younger than others, by as many as 20 years, one key reason being the prevalence of smoking among that group, around 40% of whom smoke. Although we have been very successful in reducing smoking rates in the population as a whole, we have not been successful in doing so for those with mental ill health. I will return to that.

In Great Britain in 2018, there were approximately 3.2 million vapers—6.3% of the population—which marks a significant increase since 2014, when the figure was 3.7%. Why does that matter? The tobacco control plan stated: “Tobacco is the deadliest commercially available product in England”—it is important to hold on to those words from the Government—“with tobacco regulations serving to safeguard people, particularly children and young people from the avoidable disease and premature death it causes.”

The recent prevention Green Paper clearly articulated that some people are disproportionately likely to smoke, which we should all be deeply uncomfortable with: “Smokers are disproportionately located in areas of high deprivation. In Blackpool, 1 in 4 pregnant women smoke. In Westminster, it’s 1 in 50.”

What an extraordinary contrast! Deprivation causes that significant risk to the health of mothers and babies.

According to Public Health England, vaping is at least 95% less harmful than smoking. That does not mean that vaping is safe, and it certainly does not mean that we should encourage non-smokers to start vaping, but based on all the evidence we have, vaping is considerably less harmful than smoking.

Graham Stringer (Blackley and Broughton) (Lab): I put on record my thanks to the right hon. Gentleman for his time chairing the Select Committee on Science and Technology. It has been an interesting period, in which we have gone into great detail—effectively, I think—on many subjects. I was annoyed that NHS England, which has the time to put out often crass and obvious statements on health, did not have the time to come and give us advice on e-cigarettes, the use of which, as he says, is one way get people to stop smoking.

Norman Lamb: I thank the hon. Gentleman for that. I will call him my hon. Friend, because I am demo-b-happy and I do not care about the normal rules. It has been a great pleasure to work with him on the Committee. I share his concern. Given that the Government’s own tobacco control plan describes tobacco as “the deadliest commercially available product in England”, one would have hoped that the body that runs the NHS in England would show a strong commitment to confronting that clear risk. Despite it being very clear from all the available evidence that vaping is significantly less harmful than smoking, I none the less absolutely encourage continued research in this area. We should always be alert to anything that indicates a potential risk; that is exactly what our Committee recommends.

E-cigarettes are not only less harmful than smoking, but appear to be an effective tool for stopping smoking, as the hon. Gentleman made clear. A study published earlier this year in the New England Journal of Medicine randomly assigned adults attending UK NHS stop smoking services either nicotine replacement products of their choice, including product combinations, for up to three months, or an e-cigarette starter pack. That study of 886 participants found that the one-year abstinence rate was 18% in the e-cigarette group, compared with 9.9% in the nicotine replacement group. That is a significant difference, and we need to make sure that we act on that difference now that we have knowledge of the effectiveness of e-cigarettes as a stop smoking tool.

Results from a 2019 survey carried out by YouGov for Action on Smoking and Health—ASH—found that “the three main reasons for vaping remain as an aid to quitting (22%),...preventing relapse (16%) and to save money (14%)”, because people who vape spend much less money than people who smoke. That demonstrates that users perceive e-cigarettes as a stop smoking tool. E-cigarettes are therefore likely to help the Government to meet their ambition, announced in the prevention Green Paper, for England to be smoke-free by 2030. None the less, I accept that further research is needed on the effectiveness of e-cigarettes as a stop smoking tool. Will the Government or one of their agencies request further independent research on the effectiveness of e-cigarettes as a stop smoking tool?

Our report highlights the issue of what the NHS does on smoking cessation. Cancer Research UK recently pointed out that primary care clinicians face barriers to discussing e-cigarettes with patients who smoke; one in three clinicians is unsure whether e-cigarettes are safe enough to recommend. Given the death toll from smoking, it is extraordinary that it appears that clinicians are unaware of the clear advice from Public Health England in that regard.
Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): I agree with everything that the right hon. Gentleman has said. Does he agree that the Government could reach their ambitious target, which he alluded to, by embracing vaping, getting more information out there to those clinicians and working through the law, particularly post-Brexit, to ensure that people who want to give up smoking have all the information they require in order to take up vaping instead?

Norman Lamb: I totally agree. The statistics that I am citing make the point about raising awareness, even among clinicians. We thought that it was just the general public who needed to understand better the relative risks, but clearly clinicians also need to understand the relative risks so that they can advise their patients more effectively.

Two in five clinicians feel uncomfortable recommending e-cigarettes to their patients who smoke. Again, that is an extraordinary finding. Fewer than three in 10 agree that their current knowledge is enough for advising patients about e-cigarettes. That extraordinary data reveals a clear need for the awareness raising to which the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) has just referred.

What assessment has the Minister made of the number of smoking cessation services in the NHS that are actively promoting e-cigarettes as alternatives to conventional cigarettes? It ought to be every single one throughout the country, but are they actually doing it? Do we know? Can the Minister tell us what work the Government are doing with NHS England on increasing knowledge among clinicians of the uses, benefits and risks of e-cigarettes for current smokers?

Our report recommended that NHS England should create a post for someone who is responsible for implementing the Government’s tobacco control plan. The response said:

“The Government broadly accepts this recommendation.”

However, no specific steps to implement our recommendation were set out. We pursued that with the Department of Health, and obtained this evidence:

“It is our intention to appoint an individual with lead responsibility for this role. This will be an important part of our delivery programme for the NHS Long Term Plan.”

We would all assume that that person was appointed long ago and that active work is now underway to pursue this vital agenda, which will save lives, but can the Minister confirm that NHS England has created that post and, if so, is someone actually in post and doing the job?

The Government say that, in their long-term plan, provision is made for “all smokers who are admitted to hospital being offered support to stop smoking”.

That is not due to be fully implemented until 2023-24. Again, given the extraordinary health benefits of stopping people smoking, I would have hoped for a tighter timescale than 23-24 to implement that. Will the Minister tell us how implementation of that proposal is going and whether consideration is being given to implementing it fully before 2023-24?

Our report recommended that the NHS should have a clear policy on e-cigarettes in mental health facilities that establishes a default of allowing e-cigarette use by patients. This comes back to my point that approximately 40% of those with severe and enduring mental ill health still smoke. The attitude and culture within mental health trusts is critical if we are to enable and help people with severe and enduring mental ill health to give up smoking. We said that it should be the default that e-cigarettes should be made available in mental health facilities unless there are clear evidence-based reasons for not doing so.

The Government response said:

“NHS England will provide guidance to mental health trusts that sets out that existing vapers should be permitted to use e-cigarettes as part of smoking cessation programmes, and…tobacco smokers should be supported to stop smoking through smoking cessation programmes”.

Can the Minister tell us whether that guidance has been issued? I very much hope that it has. If not, when will it be issued and what is the reason for the delay in issuing such important guidance? If it has been issued, what assessment has been made of how it is working?

The UK is making good progress in getting people to stop smoking and use e-cigarettes to achieve that, but that is at risk from recent concerns about e-cigarette use. Those concerns have been expressed particularly in other countries. We have put the concerns to Public Health England. The first is the claim that deaths in the US have been linked to the use of e-cigarettes and vaping products. The reality is that the US operates in a totally different regulatory context and “illicit products” were “implicated in this outbreak...including vaping cannabis derivatives.”

That is from Public Health England. It has also explained that “the suddenness of the outbreak across many USA states in just a few months, suggests that this is not a gradual effect of long-term use, but because of a specific agent coming into use in the affected population.”

Next are the concerns that flavoured e-cigarettes are “firing” children into vaping. Public Health England’s response explained that the data it had seen so far was reassuring that e-cigarettes were not re-normalising smoking. Furthermore, the UK and the US have different rules on advertising, nicotine concentration and education on vaping, which explains why flavours of e-cigarettes are less impactful in the UK compared with the United States.

The next issue is the introduction of a ban in India on the production, import and sale of e-cigarettes because of concerns about the risks that they pose to health and to the young. Again, an assertion has been made that is at risk of infecting the debate that we have in this country. However, Public Health England has explained:

“India is one of several countries that appears to be responding to the outbreak of lung disease among cannabis”

vapers

“by proposing a ban on nicotine inhalers.”

It has also explained that smoking is far more prevalent in India and causes 7 million deaths a year there.

Sir Kevin Barron (Rother Valley) (Lab). Is it not true that India has a massive vested public interest in the tobacco industry?

Norman Lamb: I suspect that the right hon. Gentleman knows better than I do, but I note the point that he makes. My view, based on the evidence that the Committee heard, is that the action taken by India is not based on evidence and is likely to result in more people dying of lung cancer. I think that is shameful.
I encourage all right hon. and hon. Members to read the helpful and comprehensive reply that we received from Public Health England on these issues and others, and which we have published. so that anyone can delve into the detail. I am reassured that Public Health England is in “close dialogue” with a range of international partners, and I agree with Public Health England when it says:

“It is no exaggeration to say that inflating fears about e-cigarettes could cost lives.”

Incidentally, I have concerns about the attitude at the World Health Organisation, which does not take the same evidence-based approach, as far as I can see, as this country has done. Again, that has implications through the potential loss of life for millions of people across the globe.

It seems to me that people often conflate the fact that we do not have all the long-term evidence on vaping impact with an assertion that that should lead us to conclude that we should not be recommending vaping as an alternative to smoking. Frankly, that is stupid as a public policy approach, because we know that smoking is killing—I think—more than 70,000 people in England every year, and all the evidence so far shows that nothing like that is happening from vaping. According to Public Health England, it is 95% less dangerous than smoking. Therefore, the clear public health advice has to be that vaping is an appropriate way to help people give up smoking. Of course, the best thing of all is not to vape and not to smoke, but if that is not possible for someone, the clear public health advice needs to be that vaping is better than smoking.

Will the Minister set out what contact the Government—she or other Ministers—have had with other countries on international approaches to e-cigarettes? In particular, what are they doing at the World Health Organisation to encourage a more enlightened approach? What assessment have the Government made of the effects of those international approaches on public perception of e-cigarettes in the UK? What steps will the Minister take to ensure that this misinformation on e-cigarettes is challenged?

Graham Stringer: It is not only the World Health Organisation that is not using evidence for its advice, but the EU. The EU’s directive on the size of the bowls used and the amount of substance put in is not based on evidence. It is likely to mean that those people getting a nicotine kick—much less dangerous than cigarettes—will not find the products satisfactory and will go back to smoking.

Norman Lamb: I share the hon. Gentleman’s concern about the directive and the prescriptive rules relating to vaping, which do not appear to be sufficiently evidence-based.

E-cigarettes are positive in helping current smokers to stop smoking, and they are significantly less harmful than smoking conventional cigarettes. Yes, there are unknowns about long-term risks, and we need to maintain research on e-cigarettes, but doing nothing is not an option when people’s wellbeing and lives are at risk. I look forward to the contributions of other right hon. and hon. Members, and to the Minister’s reply.

Bill Grant (Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate my friend, the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), on securing this important debate.

E-cigarette use in the UK has followed a gently rising trend over the past few years, and last year, statistics from the Office for National Statistics showed that 6.3% of those over 16 were regular users—a rise of less than 1% over five years. In our August 2018 report, the Science and Technology Committee concluded that e-cigarettes should not be viewed in the same way as conventional cigarettes. They are an effective stop smoking aid and should be formally considered as such.

In its response to the letter sent on behalf of the Committee by the Chair, Public Health England confirmed that it believed, as the Committee did, that e-cigarettes are around 95% less harmful than conventional smoking. As our Committee found:

“A medically licensed e-cigarette could assist smoking cessation efforts by making it easier for medical professionals to discuss and recommend them as a stop smoking treatment with patients.”

Existing smokers should be encouraged to give up, but if that is not possible, they should switch to e-cigarettes as a considerably less harmful alternative.

We must acknowledge that there are uncertainties about the longer-term health effects of e-cigarettes. They have not been in circulation long enough for any scientific research to be certain. Concerns have been raised in the United States, as was mentioned, about an isolated outbreak of serious lung injury linked to illicit vaping products, but I suspect, as the right hon. Gentleman said, that there may have been other factors at play in that instance. In any event, we have not seen that replicated in the UK, largely because, as ASH confirms, we have a strong regulatory system in place, which is not yet the case in the US.

The Government mandate strict conditions, namely a minimum age of sale, a ban on advertising in broadcast media, print or the internet, and a stipulation that products containing over 20 milligrams per millilitre of nicotine need a medicinal licence. Products must also be child-resistant and tamper-evident, and packs must carry a health warning covering over 30% of the surface area.

Moreover, to be balanced, any judgement on the future of e-cigarettes must take account of human nature and the most likely alternative to vaping, namely returning to harmful conventional cigarettes, which have proven to be a serious health risk over time. While some groups would prefer the firmest possible line—Cancer Research UK, for instance, is pressing for a tobacco-free UK within the decade—most groups agree that e-cigarettes can provide a useful route towards quitting harmful conventional cigarettes.

We have seen clear evidence that e-cigarettes are an effective quitting aid for adult smokers and, crucially, the percentage of young smokers trying e-cigarettes in Britain is small, with continued use smaller still. They flirt with the e-cigarette, but do not continue with it. There is little evidence to suggest that such products act as a gateway to conventional smoking—they are not, as some would suggest, a stepping-stone to conventional smoking—and figures show that almost 3 million people in the UK today are using e-cigarettes as an aid to quitting harmful conventional cigarettes.
Unfortunately, the Committee found that some aspects of the regulatory system for e-cigarettes are holding back their use as a stop smoking measure. Restrictions on the strength of refills and maximum tank size have led some users to move away from e-cigarettes and return, sadly and regrettably, to conventional smoking. There seems to be little scientific basis for these limits, and I am pleased that the Government, in response to our report, intend to consider these anomalies and how to address them. It is good to see that the Government also agree with our conclusion:

“There should be a shift to a more risk-proportionate regulatory environment; where regulations, advertising rules and tax duties reflect the evidence of the relative harms of the various e-cigarette and tobacco products available.”

Such a move might well bring about the welcome improvements in health that we, as a society, desperately seek, particularly from lung cancers and other by-products and unintended consequences of smoking. It is proven beyond doubt that conventional smoking is harmful. I look forward to seeing those changes implemented.

I take this opportunity to speak directly to conventional smokers. Despite being a fire officer for 31 years, sadly I was a 50-a-day smoker for many years, although I have long since stopped. Believe me: being a smoker was a costly, smelly and unhealthy mistake in my life. I only realised that afterwards. Yes, I enjoyed my cigarettes then, as the smoker today does. Even in my time in the fire service, when I left a fire with my breathing apparatus on and pulled the face mask off, some kindly colleague would have a pre-lit cigarette for me. It was certainly madness at the time, and I indulged in it. It is not easy to stop, but anything that is good is not always easy. Believe me, it can be done. My plea to those who do smoke is: you can stop if you put your mind to it, and it is absolutely worthwhile.

Norman Lamb: The hon. Gentleman kept that information very quiet on the Select Committee.

Bill Grant: It is something to be neither proud nor ashamed of. It was part of the culture of the time. I was part of that culture. There are two things in life that I have never regretted: marrying my wife, Agnes, and giving up smoking. They are equally wonderful.

I have had the pleasure to serve on the Science and Technology Committee since shortly after I was elected to this House, and it has been a fascinating and often inspiring journey. I am incredibly proud of the work we have undertaken as a Committee, ably assisted by a very fine secretariat, and I wish to put on record my thanks to them for their support. Indeed, as my friend the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) did—that unfortunately surveys have shown that 40% of clinicians are uncomfortable recommending e-cigarettes to their patients, and a further third are unsure whether they are safe to recommend, notwithstanding what Public Health England says about them. Moreover, just 30% feel that their knowledge is sufficient to advise patients on vaping.

Healthcare professionals must be made fully aware of the benefits of e-cigarettes in aiding people to quit. Although vaping is not completely risk-free, the reality is that it is significantly safer than smoking conventional cigarettes. Healthcare professionals must be made fully aware of that, so that they can ensure that their patients have the strongest chance of quitting smoking. It is difficult, and it may not necessarily be something that new doctors or doctors in training will be looking at. However, any health professionals attending or reading this debate, especially general practitioners, could do worse than go round to the vaping shop on their local high street to talk to the people who sell the products, because those are the people who trace their patients. They will know people who have gone from 50 cigarettes a day to none, or who used to need higher hits of nicotine but are now on lower and lower doses. I know people who still vape but use no nicotine at all; they are satisfying not an addiction, but a habit of using their hands. That is what
ought to happen. It is quite true that there is no long-term evidence, just as there was not when the first heart transplant happened in South Africa, but it is pretty clear that there is evidence out there in our communities. We need our health professionals to go and talk to the people who have probably been dealing with their patients for some time.

Naturally, many people have raised deep concerns about whether vaping can operate as a gateway to smoking conventional tobacco cigarettes, but there is no evidence to suggest that such a phenomenon has materialised in any meaningful or demonstrated way. ASH, which I have been active with in this country for decades, has been monitoring what is happening annually, particularly around young children, and there is no evidence that it is causing nicotine addiction and leading people on to cigarettes.

I have to say that some of the evidence that we have seen about vaping in America is shocking. Some of the stuff that they put in is class A drugs—that is why we are having deaths. I know from going to America from time to time, where I have two step-grandchildren, that one company, which shall remain nameless in this debate, has been promoting vaping to young children with different flavours, although not necessarily with nicotine. When we talk to schools about it, they are up in arms about the nuisance and the litter. There is something to think about there, but we should not be too scared of it.

Although there are advertising restrictions and regulations on vaping, they are less stringent than those that apply to tobacco products. In June, the Library published a briefing paper that is well worth reading, “Advertising: vaping and e-cigarettes”. I first campaigned against tobacco in the 1993-94 Session when I introduced the Tobacco Advertising Bill, a private Member’s Bill to ban tobacco advertising and promotion. We are a long way down the road now, but there are still lessons to be learned from the Library’s paper about how these products are advertised.

The Science and Technology Committee has recommended that cigarette pack inserts could be used to refer smokers to e-cigarettes as a healthier alternative, but unfortunately that is currently banned under the Standardised Packaging of Tobacco Products Regulations 2015. We need to think quickly, because the people addicted to cigarettes are the ones who are going into shops and buying e-cigarettes. They are the people we should be targeting; I do not think that we can do it with things like websites. We could change those regulations in super-quick time—I can’t, because I’m off, but Parliament could, which would put us in a position to get to the people who are still addicted.

E-cigarettes need to be endorsed as mainstream in cessation programmes. About three years ago I visited the Leicester smoking cessation programme, which has been at the forefront of using such products. It has a wonderful scheme—led by a nurse at the time—in which pregnant women vaped at least throughout their pregnancy, which greatly enhanced the health and the life chances of their child. There is no reason why we should not make that mainstream. I know that people who smoke will now be referred to community pharmacies; that is good, but we should be looking at specific interventions with these products for people who are vulnerable, including unborn children.

Smoking cessations ought to be funded directly by the tobacco industry. I know that that would be an issue for the Treasury, but the Minister will need to talk to it. We often talk about making the polluter pay; tobacco companies should be paying for our smoking cessation programmes. Sadly, as we have said in previous debates, some of those programmes are now fading away. There are parts of this country that still have heavy and intense levels of adult smoking but have no smoking cessation programmes at all. That is wrong and, with more than 80,000 deaths a year, it should be stopped.

2.7 pm

Gareth Johnson (Dartford) (Con): Unlike the three previous speakers, I rather hope that this will not be my last speech in Westminster Hall—but that is up to the people of Dartford, not me.

I am pleased to contribute to the debate, because I feel strongly that vaping is something that we should embrace as a country. It has been mentioned that Public Health England says that vaping is 95% risk-free; that is really significant, and it is not just Public Health England making such statements. Cancer Research UK says that there are significant benefits from vaping in comparison with tobacco consumption. ASH, the British Heart Foundation and the British Lung Foundation—organisations that understandably have traditionally frowned on anything associated with smoking—recognise that vaping saves lives. That is what we are talking about, and the sooner the country recognises that we have an invention that could save thousands of lives in the UK, let alone the rest of the world, the sooner we can start saving the maximum possible number of lives.

It was with great regret that we heard the stories coming out of the United States. It was only when we starting drilling down and saw that the deaths were potentially linked to acetates, cannabis oil and so on—those are the irritants actually causing the deaths—that we recognised that we should not allow those tragic circumstances to cloud people’s image of vaping. It is not only clinicians who are unsure about vaping, and whether they can recommend it to patients; the general public are also unsure whether vaping is as safe as some experts have said. We need to educate people, and say that it is a well-known fact that tobacco seriously damages health and therefore is highly risky, but that with vaping the risks are substantially smaller.

Nobody in this debate, or anywhere in the House of Commons that I am aware of, is suggesting that people who do not smoke should take up vaping. The suggestion is that it is people who smoke, and who are addicted to tobacco and nicotine, who will benefit from vaping. There are risks associated with pretty much anything, and vaping is no exception. The message should go out loud and clear that people who do not smoke should not start vaping, but people who smoke may wish to try that alternative as an effective way of reducing their tobacco consumption, or helping them to come off tobacco completely.

I welcome the fact that some tobacco companies have embraced vaping; they realise its potential. Japanese Tobacco International has highlighted to me some of the dangers associated with products that do not contain nicotine, and so do not come under the Tobacco and Related Products Regulations 2016 and can be targeted
at children. They can be marketed to look like food, or something trendy that people want to get involved with, and as they do not have to comply with the tobacco regulations, their ingredients are not known. We need to look at that.

The Science and Technology Committee, chaired by the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), has looked at the 2016 regulations, which have serious flaws. For a start, they should not lump together tobacco and vaping products: they should be covered by separate regulations. That would bring an end to the ridiculous situation whereby a vaping product that has no nicotine in it must have a warning on its front saying, “This product contains nicotine”. If the vaping company does not put that warning on its product, it will fall foul of the regulations, but if it does, it might fall foul of other regulations. It is a crazy situation that has developed.

We need to consider whether it is right to allow more advertising of vaping products. I believe that it is, but regulations seem to prevent that. I think it is right that we should enable people to be educated, and aware of the products available and their potential benefits.

I do not want to turn this into a debate on Brexit, but there is no getting away from the fact that once we leave the European Union, we as a country can look at the regulations ourselves, and see what best suits our needs and what would be a sensible approach to vaping. We can ensure that people are aware of vaping and can benefit from it, so we should do so.

I have met a number of organisations that are trying to push forward a change in vaping regulations. Imperial Brands—formerly Imperial Tobacco—is doing a lot, and there is also a company called Blu, whose products are pioneering. That is a key part of the process. Companies are investing a lot in developing products that will be attractive to smokers, in that they will satisfy their cravings, so that they feel less necessity to smoke cigarettes.

I do not want to demonise smokers. If an adult chooses to smoke, knowing the risks, that is their decision. However, it is incumbent on the Government to ensure that people are aware of the alternatives to smoking, of the risks, and that there is comparatively less risk associated with vaping.

The Government are rightly pursuing a target of reducing the number of people who smoke and eventually eliminating smoking in this country. That is very ambitious, and if we are to achieve that, it will be necessary to introduce people to vaping through their GP.

Sir Kevin Barron: On this idea that smoking is an adult thing, very few people start smoking after the age of 21. The hard reality is that for most people, the starting point comes when they are quite young. I think I was about 11 or 12 when I started getting addicted to nicotine. I think we have to be very careful about this. It is not really an adult choice; it is just something that adults have done from a very early age.

Gareth Johnson: I totally agree. I take the view that if adults want to smoke, knowing the risks, that is up to them. However, there is a duty of care on the Government to ensure that tobacco products are not consumed by children. That is absolutely clear, and it is right that we keep the age at which people can start vaping at 18; we do not want vaping products targeted at children. In my experience, no responsible vaping company would do that or has done that.

The Government approach is sensible. I believe that they can embrace the potential of vaping to save lives. There are so many measures that could be taken—through the taxation system, through advertising, through education, and by making people aware of these products and making them more accessible to smokers.

We must recognise that for the first time in my life, there is something that genuinely can help people to get off tobacco—something effective that works. If we look at a graph of the number of people smoking and a graph of the number of vapers in this country, we can see a direct correlation: the more people vape, the fewer people smoke. We need to highlight that and celebrate it, and the Government should take that forward.

2.16 pm

Jane Dodds (Brecon and Radnorshire) (LD): I have not put my name forward to speak, but I would like to say a few words.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Yes, indeed. I call Jane Dodds.

Jane Dodds: Thank you, Sir Henry. I wanted to draw attention to the correlation between people who have mental health difficulties and the propensity to smoke. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb), who has championed the cause of mental health throughout his time in Parliament. I hope that Committee members will not mind my thanking him for everything he has done.

This debate relates specifically to England, and I am a Welsh MP, but I draw attention to the issue of cross-border healthcare. Many people in Wales who need to attend a residential mental health unit have to travel to England, and of course there is complete disparity between the practice in Wales and that in residential units in England. I realise that this is not totally within the Committee’s brief, but I would like it to consider how the policy for mental health units in England, which have particular rules and regulations around access to e-cigarettes, could be married up with the policy in Wales. There are significant differences between them. We talked earlier about learning from international bodies and countries around the world, but there is also a need to look at the whole UK, and consider how we can get parity between the nations. Thank you, Sir Henry, for allowing me to speak. Diolch.

2.17 pm

Mrs Sharon Hodgson (Washington and Sunderland West) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I apologise if I sound a bit croaky; I have a cold that is going round. Hopefully I will get rid of it soon, given what is to come over the next few weeks.

I thank the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) for introducing this debate, and for his characteristically well-informed speech. It is sad to think that it could very well be his last speech in what has been an illustrious career as an MP. I am sure that it will
not be his last speech as a campaigner or activist. I also congratulate him on his work chairing the Science and Technology Committee, and on the excellent report that we are considering.

I thank all the other right hon. and hon. Members who have spoken, including the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant), and my right hon. Friend the Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron), who I have enjoyed working with for many years. He has also had an illustrious career, and was an excellent Chair of the Health Committee for a number of years; he will be sorely missed in this place. There were also speeches by the hon. Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) and by the hon. Lady who has just spoken; I did not catch the name of her constituency.

Sir Henry Bellingham (in the Chair): Brecon and Radnorshire—by-election win.

Mrs Hodgson: Excellent. Thank you.

As we have heard, there is still some uncertainty about the use of e-cigarettes. They entered the UK market only 12 years ago, and because this technology is still so young, we do not know for certain what its long-term impacts on health will be. What we do know is that e-cigarettes are around 95% less harmful than conventional cigarettes, and because of that, an estimated 2.9 million people in the UK are using them to stop smoking. Each year, tens of thousands of people successfully use e-cigarettes to quit. A randomised controlled trial, published in the New England Journal of Medicine earlier this year, found e-cigarettes used in a stop smoking service to be nearly twice as effective as licensed nicotine replacement therapies, such as patches and gum.

The importance of e-cigarettes as a smoking cessation tool should therefore not be dismissed. However, that must come with the caveat—I think everyone has made this point—that using an e-cigarette is not completely risk-free. There has been a recent outbreak of serious lung injury in the US linked to vaping, although that has not been replicated in the UK. Currently, 3.6 million people vape in the UK, yet the number of cases of severe respiratory pathology associated with vaping is low and diverse, with reports over a long period.

The importance of e-cigarettes as a smoking cessation tool should therefore not be dismissed. However, that must come with the caveat—I think everyone has made this point—that using an e-cigarette is not completely risk-free. There has been a recent outbreak of serious lung injury in the US linked to vaping, although that has not been replicated in the UK. Currently, 3.6 million people vape in the UK, yet the number of cases of severe respiratory pathology associated with vaping is low and diverse, with reports over a long period.

I agree with ASH’s recommendation that e-cigarette users should buy vaping products, including e-liquid, only from mainstream suppliers that sell regulated products, because using black market products may carry lethal risks. They should report any adverse effects from e-cigarettes to the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency using the yellow card scheme. If they experience serious adverse effects that they think are due to vaping, they should immediately stop vaping and get advice from their doctor.

The importance of e-cigarettes as a smoking cessation tool should therefore not be dismissed. However, that must come with the caveat—I think everyone has made this point—that using an e-cigarette is not completely risk-free. There has been a recent outbreak of serious lung injury in the US linked to vaping, although that has not been replicated in the UK. Currently, 3.6 million people vape in the UK, yet the number of cases of severe respiratory pathology associated with vaping is low and diverse, with reports over a long period.

I agree with ASH’s recommendation that e-cigarette users should buy vaping products, including e-liquid, only from mainstream suppliers that sell regulated products, because using black market products may carry lethal risks. They should report any adverse effects from e-cigarettes to the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency using the yellow card scheme. If they experience serious adverse effects that they think are due to vaping, they should immediately stop vaping and get advice from their doctor.

Has the Minister considered launching an e-cigarette safety education programme that will ensure that e-cigarette users know the risks, and what to do if anything goes wrong and they manifest any such symptoms? That may lessen the possibility of manifesting the same patterns that we have seen in the US of lung injuries linked to e-cigarettes.

The Committee’s recommendation 4 says that NHS England should issue e-cigarette guidance to all NHS mental health trusts, and the default should be to allow e-cigarette use by patients. As we have heard, people with mental health issues smoke significantly more than the rest of the population, and could therefore benefit significantly from using e-cigarettes to stop smoking. Encouraging and allowing patients in mental health units who are smokers to switch to e-cigarettes as a means of smoking cessation would allow them to engage with their treatment sessions in the facilities without the interruption of smoking breaks.

A third of the 50 NHS trusts that responded to the Committee’s survey ban the use of e-cigarettes. The Government have agreed to issue guidance to NHS trusts about e-cigarettes. Will the Minister please tell us when she anticipates that it will be published? I know that she might have to rush it out in the next couple of days, but she might have a magic wand and be able to do that. Doing so could allow patients in mental health units to engage more fully with their treatment, which could improve outcomes.

Every contact counts, especially when it comes to smoking cessation, and none should be missed. However, due to the Government’s public health budget cuts since 2013, which I know the Minister is not personally responsible for, smoking cessation services have suffered, leaving the most vulnerable smokers behind, without any support to quit smoking. That must change. Again, I ask the Government to reverse those public health budget cuts, so that local authorities can provide the smoking cessation services that their local communities need and deserve. I look forward to the Minister’s response.

2.24 pm

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care (Jo Churchill): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Sir Henry. I congratulate the right hon. Member for North Norfolk (Norman Lamb) on securing the debate, and I thank the whole Committee for the report, for its tone, and for the intelligent way in which it has approached the difficult subject of trying to stop behaviour that is detrimental to individuals.

We want smoking to reduce to zero, and for us to be smoke-free by 2030. It is an ambitious programme, but it will benefit many more people than just the individuals who smoke themselves, as it affects those around them. I thank the right hon. Gentleman, whom I have always highly respected, for his important work leading the Science and Technology Committee, and for his broader work on the health agenda. Although today’s debate might be his last in this place, I hope that it will not be the last time I hear him waxing lyrical on the airwaves about this subject. I say the same for the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron), who has really been quite formative in this area, both on the Health Committee and in his work with the all-party parliamentary group on smoking and health.
It is timely that we are having this discussion at the very end of this year’s Stoptober campaign; I pay tribute again to the right hon. Member for North Norfolk for his work in starting it. There is never a better time to stop smoking, and I encourage everybody who is thinking about doing so to visit their local stop smoking service, or to go online, and consider all the options available to help them to quit.

I am really proud of the tobacco control work over the past two decades and the progress that has been made, for which we have been recognised internationally. According to the Association of European Cancer Leagues’ tobacco control scale, the UK has been rated consistently as having the most comprehensive tobacco control programme in Europe. As we have heard from the numbers discussed, it is working—but we are not there yet.

Smoking remains one of the leading causes of preventable illness and premature death, with more than 78,000 deaths a year. That is not only a waste but a personal tragedy for all families affected. We are determined to do more, as set out in our tobacco control plan, the NHS long-term plan and the prevention Green Paper, which only concluded on 14 October. I am looking forward to seeing the results of that consultation.

Our ambition is to be smoke-free by 2030. We know that we need to work harder in certain groups, including pregnant women and those with mental health issues. Like the right hon. Gentleman, I was struck by the extremely high prevalence of smoking in some areas. He mentioned Blackpool but, as he knows from representing a coastal region, in many coastal areas there is a very high prevalence of pregnant women who smoke. They interact with many healthcare professionals during what should be the enjoyable, exciting time when they are expecting a baby. We should use every single one of those interactions to help them to quit.

I have already asked officials whether there are other forms in which we can message that particular group in a way that helps them to understand the risk, as well as the things that are available to help them. I listened to the right hon. Gentleman’s point about people with enduring mental health issues. Facilities should allow e-cigarettes and provide more support. That is an ongoing part of the agenda. I will write to Simon Stevens to see where we are, and I will let the Committee know.

**Norman Lamb:** I thank the Minister for her very kind comments. I am pleased that she will write to Simon Stevens, because pressure from Government Ministers on NHS England to recognise the significance of the subject is really important. I am conscious that I asked a lot of questions in my contribution, and she may well be unable to answer them all, but will she write to me before Parliament rises next week, if possible, to answer those questions that she is able to, so that we get that on the record?

**Jo Churchill:** I will do my very best. If there is anything I have not covered, I hope that the answer will be winging its way to the right hon. Gentleman on Monday.

The Government are absolutely clear that quitting smoking and nicotine use entirely is the best way for people to improve their health. We recognise that e-cigarettes are not risk-free, as has been stated by all Members who have contributed; however, they can play an exceedingly important role in helping smokers to quit for good, particularly when combined with stop smoking services. It is an addiction, and we are trying to achieve a step change in people’s practices and behaviours that enables them to quit entirely. We do not know the long-term harms of e-cigarette use, and no authorities in the UK assert that they are harmless. Based on current evidence, Public Health England and the Royal College of Physicians estimate that e-cigarettes are considerably less harmful than smoking because of the reduction in levels of exposure to toxicants in e-cigarette aerosols compared with tobacco smoke. However, I reiterate that quitting smoking is the best option.

It is fair to say that opinions on e-cigarettes are divided, both in the UK and globally. It is important that we listen to concerns, while looking objectively at the evidence base and seeking to build it further, which I think is the point that the right hon. Member for North Norfolk was making. On the question of research, I assure him that there is an NHS England dedicated lead—a director for prevention—in place, overseeing the NHS long-term plan commitments. I note the right hon. Gentleman’s comments about India and the fact that making decisions too quickly, not based on the research that is available, has unintended consequences.

As the House is aware, we have introduced measures in the UK to regulate e-cigarettes: to reduce the risk of harm to children; to protect against e-cigarettes acting as a gateway to starting smoking; another important point that has been made today—to provide assurance on relative safety, and to give businesses legal certainty. Regarding what has happened in the United States of America, we take those concerns seriously—we are aware of the tragic deaths associated with vaping in the United States and are monitoring the situation carefully. Public Health England and the Medicines and Healthcare Products Regulatory Agency are in close contact with the US agencies. Investigations are ongoing; they have not yet been able to confirm the definite cause of the deaths, although it appears that the majority of those who died had used illicit cannabidiol with THC products, which led to those unfortunate deaths.

To date, there have been no known deaths from e-cigarette use in the UK. The MHRA yellow card reporting system is in place to report any adverse effects. It has been running for three years and, to date, has been notified of about 85 individual cases; all have been minor, and none has been considered life-threatening. However, I assure the right hon. Member for North Norfolk and all other Members who have contributed to this debate that we remain vigilant on the issue and are grateful for all research done in this area, including—my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) alluded to this—by those within the charity sector who do a great deal of work in looking at the harms caused.

In our tobacco control plan, we made strong commitments to monitor the impact of regulation and policy on e-cigarettes and novel tobacco products. To inform future policy, we are looking closely at the evidence on safety, uptake, health impact and the effectiveness of these products as smoking cessation aids. Public Health England will continue to update its evidence base on e-cigarettes and other novel nicotine delivery systems.
The use of e-cigarettes by young people was mentioned by the right hon. Member for Rother Valley and by my hon. Friend the Member for Dartford. Such use currently remains low, at 2%, and we have not seen the rise that has occurred in the United States. However, we will monitor the data closely to ensure that regular use does not increase and it is not seen as a gateway to tobacco use, and will also keep a close eye on any new evidence about long-term harms caused by flavourings. If the evidence shows that we need to address either or both of these issues, we will consider taking action, including further regulatory action where necessary. I would like the industry to show stronger leadership in the areas of e-cigarette product labelling and, in particular, design to ensure that its products do not appeal to young people. Some of the current naming appears to lean in that direction.

In future, we will have the opportunity to reappraise current tobacco and e-cigarette regulation to ensure that it continues to protect the nation’s health. I thank all Members who have spoken today, particularly the right hon. Member for North Norfolk, who will be leaving this House. Today has been a bit of a goodbye party for him, for my hon. Friend the Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant)—I am staggered by the revelation that he smoked 50 a day; I wonder that he had time to do much else, let alone run around being a fireman—and for the right hon. Member for Rother Valley. I am sure that all of them will continue to work in that direction.

I reiterate the Government’s commitment to help people quit smoking, which is ultimately the best course of action, and to seek evidence on reduced-risk products. We will continue to be driven by that evidence. Although we can celebrate the fact that adult smoking in England has fallen by a quarter and regular smoking among children has fallen by a half, I will truly be able to celebrate—like all right hon. and hon. Members present, I am sure—if we reach the goal, which both the report celebrates, like all right hon. and hon. Members present, and we can celebrate the fact that adult smoking in England remains low, at 2%, and we have not seen the rise that has occurred in the United States. However, we will monitor the data closely to ensure that regular use does not increase and it is not seen as a gateway to tobacco use, and will also keep a close eye on any new evidence about long-term harms caused by flavourings. If the evidence shows that we need to address either or both of these issues, we will consider taking action, including further regulatory action where necessary. I would like the industry to show stronger leadership in the areas of e-cigarette product labelling and, in particular, design to ensure that its products do not appeal to young people. Some of the current naming appears to lean in that direction.

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2.36 pm

**Norman Lamb:** I thank the Minister for her response to the debate and for her kind comments. There has been a remarkable consensus about the action we are taking in this country, and the need for it to be evidence-based. It is clear that the United Kingdom is ahead of the game internationally on smoking cessation work, and that is something we should celebrate. However, we should never allow ourselves to feel that we have done the job. We have so much still to do, particularly given the number of people who die every year from smoking, as the right hon. Member for Rother Valley (Sir Kevin Barron) made clear. The carnage—the death toll—is enormous, so the work needs to continue.

We have heard some wonderful admissions. The right hon. Member for Rother Valley and the hon. Member for Ayr, Carrick and Cumnock (Bill Grant) have admitted to smoking heavily in the past; they are both wonderful living examples of life after smoking. [Interjection.] Less coughing, please. They are wonderful examples to others of the potential value of giving up smoking, and I wish both of them a very happy retirement from this place.

I will quickly pick up on one or two points. I agree with the right hon. Member for Rother Valley that inserts in packs are a very good way of targeting an important public health message directly at people who need to hear it, and who need to be reassured that giving up smoking and vaping instead is going to help their health—a point we made in the report. I also agree with him about the case for the tobacco industry making a contribution to the cost of smoking cessation services, on the basic principle that the polluter pays.

My hon. Friend the Member for Brecon and Radnorshire (Jane Dodds), who has had to leave, made some important points about cross-border health issues. I applaud her for championing access to mental health support in Wales, which is incredibly important. The point in this dispute is that every mental health facility and, in particular, every in-patient mental health facility, whether in England, Wales or Scotland, should offer the same access and support to enable people to give up smoking, using vaping as the mechanism to do so. Giving up smoking will lead to significant gains in not only people’s life expectancy, but their mental health; smoking harms their mental health as well as killing them earlier.

The hon. Members for Dartford (Gareth Johnson) and for Blackley and Broughton (Graham Stringer) both made the point that regulation must always be evidence-based. That has not been the case with the European Union directive or internationally, given the debate we have had about the World Health Organisation and the approach that is taken in America. In this country we want our regulations to be evidence-based, to give people the best chance of giving up smoking and having a healthier life.

On a personal basis, not in my role as Chair of the Select Committee, I agree with the hon. Member for Washington and Sunderland West (Mrs Hodgson) that investment in public health is important. There is much evidence that investment in early prevention work of all sorts, and in public mental health, provides—in brutal economic terms—a return on investment. It also changes lives. The plea to whomever becomes the Government after 12 December is this: make the investment in public health, because we will all benefit.

I thank you, Sir Henry, for your stewardship of the debate, and I wish all hon. Members well for the next few weeks. I am very relieved that I am not fighting to retain my seat in the middle of winter.

**Question put and agreed to.**

**Resolved.**

That this House has considered the Seventh Report of the Science and Technology Committee, Session 2017-19, E-cigarettes, HC 505, and the Government Response, Cm 9738.

2.41 pm

**Sitting suspended.**
Disability-inclusive Development

[Mr Nigel Evans in the Chair]

3 pm

Stephen Twigg (Liverpool, West Derby) (Lab/Co-op):
I beg to move.


It is, as ever, a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, not least because you serve as a distinguished member of the International Development Committee. I thank you, and indeed the other members of the Committee who are not present, for your service on the Committee. I also thank the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy), who previously served with great distinction on the International Development Committee and who, like me, is standing down at the forthcoming general election. He has played an extraordinary leadership role on the Conservative Benches and in working cross-party across a range of development and humanitarian issues. I pay tribute to him for that and wish him well for the future. I thank the Minister, the shadow Minister and the Parliamentary Private Secretary for their attendance today at what I hope will be a positive and focused debate on an important issue.

In July, the International Development Committee released our thirteenth report, addressing the Department for International Development’s work on mainstreaming disability inclusion. Earlier this month, the Government published their response to the report. I am pleased that they responded very positively, accepting either wholly or partially all but two of our recommendations. I look forward to hearing from the Minister how DFID intends to achieve progress in the areas to which it is committed.

When we launched this short inquiry last December, we invited submissions on all aspects of the Department’s work on disability. We had a particular focus on whether the Department’s new disability strategy provided an adequate framework for approaching disability-inclusive development. I am grateful to everyone who gave evidence to our inquiry, and I put on the record my thanks to the fantastic Committee staff, some of whom are in the Public Gallery, for their hard work on the inquiry.

We have seen in recent years a substantial increase in DFID’s focus on disability. The Department launched its first ever strategy for disability-inclusive development, and the United Kingdom co-hosted the first global disability summit with the Government of Kenya and the International Disability Alliance. It is against that backdrop that we took an early look at this work. Overall, we were very pleased that the Government have reacted positively to this agenda.

It was under my predecessor, Lord Bruce, that the International Development Committee made a number of recommendations, including that the Department should develop a specific strategy on disability. I believe it is a critical step both in boosting disability inclusion and in ensuring that the Department has a clear commitment to disabled people right the way across its programming on development and in humanitarian crises. It is crucial in the context of the global goals—the sustainable development goals. As the UN Secretary-General, António Guterres, outlines:

“Societies will never achieve the SDGs without the full participation of everyone, including people with disabilities.”

Disability is surely at the heart of this endeavour. A billion people, or around 15% of the world’s population, have some form of disability. It is estimated that around four in five of people with disabilities live in the world’s poorest countries, and that one in five people in those countries have some form of disability. They are perhaps one of the groups most at risk of being left behind. In many countries, what we would regard as basic or essential services for disabled people are not available—or if they are available, they are of very poor quality.

The “UN Flagship Report on Disability and Development 2018” found that poverty rates are higher on average for disabled people. On global goal 2—zero hunger—it found that:

“the average percentage of persons with disabilities who are unable to afford a meal with protein every second day is almost double that of persons without disabilities.”

Of course, we live in a world scarred by conflict. Armed conflict is a major cause of disability. Research by Human Rights Watch across a number of countries, including Cameroon, Syria and Yemen, shows that people with disabilities in situations of armed conflict face a disproportionate level of violence, forced displacement and ongoing neglect. Even more horrifying, Human Rights Watch found that, in some cases, disabled people are simply abandoned in their homes or in deserted villages for days or even weeks, with very little access to food or water.

I recently met Bahia Zrikem, Humanity and Inclusion’s humanitarian and policy co-ordinator for Syria. For the past eight years of the Syria conflict, Humanity and Inclusion, previously known as Handicap International, has deployed rehabilitation teams and partners to help Syrians, particularly in Jordan and Lebanon. More than 60% of refugee households from Syria have someone with a disability, and one in five Syrian refugees now living in Lebanon or Jordan have a disability. The challenges that they face are enormous.

I support Humanity and Inclusion’s Stop Bombing Civilians campaign. I hope that ending the use of explosive weapons in populated areas will be at the centre of the Government’s forthcoming review of the protection of civilians strategy. I pay tribute to Humanity and Inclusion and all the other organisations working in this field for advocating the rights of people with disabilities. Such organisations represent the experience and views of people with disabilities, and the Committee did its utmost to ensure that those voices shaped our inquiry and its resulting recommendations.

I pay tribute to Sightbox, a small charity born out of the passion and leadership of Dr John Patterson, who is the headteacher of St Vincent’s School for the visually impaired in my constituency in Liverpool. Pupils at St Vincent’s have created Sightbox containers filled with equipment, providing blind and visually impaired children with the means to access education and sport, and to have a more independent lifestyle. The boxes have been sent around the world to countries including Nepal, Gambia and Pakistan.

Too often in the past, development programmes have left out people with disabilities, and disabled people have not been involved in the decisions that affect their
lives. That is why we welcome DFID’s decision to mainstream disability inclusion across the work of the Department.

Last year’s global disability summit was an important step forward. The Department announced initiatives that became part of the disability strategy, alongside the charter for change, which was signed by participating countries. The Committee commends those initiatives, which demonstrate true global leadership. We know that disability inclusion was a high priority for the previous DFID Secretary, who is now the Home Secretary, and particularly for her successor, the right hon. Member for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt). We have seen a lot of change in the Department this year, and I urge the Minister to reflect on that. It is so important that DFID maintains momentum on delivering on the global disability summit commitments, and that it continues to take the lead in urging other donors to act and deliver on their commitments. I hope that the priority given by the two previous Secretaries of State will be maintained—the current Secretary of State was very positive when we asked him about the subject last week.

I welcome the Government’s commitment in their response to develop robust accountability on this issue. I hope the Minister can say a bit more about the Department’s plan for an independent secretariat and governance structure, so that everyone, including DFID, is fully accountable for the delivery of its commitments.

As part of its strategy for disability-inclusive development, the Department has a twin-track approach that involves funding projects that are disability-specific alongside mainstreaming disability across other programmes. The Department takes a similar approach in other cross-cutting thematic areas, such as climate change, and the Committee believes that in principle it is the right approach. It has the potential to achieve real and sustainable improvements, provided the commitment is there in a sustained and sustainable way. Early progress has been positive, but much work still needs to be done.

The Committee received several pieces of evidence expressing concern that aspects of the strategy and delivery plan were vague, adding to a broader worry about the lack of clarity about what is expected of the staff who are to implement mainstreaming. Programmes, business units and teams across the Department need clarity about what mainstreaming involves in practice, so that they can implement it as effectively as possible. As Humanity and Inclusion told us,

“Disability Strategy’s Delivery Plan does provide a framework for actions, with lead departments, and as such is a vital and welcome tool for outlining DFID’s work on inclusion. But in many cases actions are too vague and lack specific outcomes.”

The Committee is concerned that there is a risk that implementation might be inconsistent across DFID, and difficult to measure. I am pleased that DFID has committed to monitoring the progress of its business units in meeting inclusion standards. Hopefully that will help provide a better understanding of how effective the two-strand approach to inclusion is.

Sightsavers, a fantastic charity, recommended that DFID republishes its delivery plan to make it more specific, and to include a clear evaluation mechanism, and a timeline for when all business units should meet the minimum standards. The Department has extended the deadline for its republished plan to June next year. I really appreciate the desire to get it right, so I hope that the Minister can outline what opportunities there will be for a consultative update on planned changes to the delivery plan in that period. I hope also that DFID will use the opportunity to update its strategy to include some of the more neglected areas on which there should have been specific commitments, such as health, ageing, and the inclusion of people with intellectual disabilities.

The Committee feels strongly that barriers to education should be removed as a top priority. The Minister leads on education for the Department and gave evidence to the Select Committee on it earlier this week. I know that his personal commitment is strong. We know from the evidence that disabled children face huge barriers to education. We know from constituency casework, and the evidence that comes before us and the Education Committee, that that is the case in our own country. The Education Commission has estimated that half—50%—of all children with disabilities in not only low but middle-income countries are out of school. Of course, that is an average. In some of the poorest and most fragile countries, the figures are even worse.

As we said in the IDC’s 2017 report on education:

“DFID has shown leadership on education for girls and young women...The Department should now use its influence in the same way to shine a light on the needs of disabled children. It has made great progress with the Disability Framework, but needs to now ensure this is being implemented across all DFID programmes.”

I know that DFID’s education policy, “Get Children Learning”, is working towards that aim, and is supporting children with disabilities in moving into mainstream education wherever possible. It supports comprehensive and cost-effective interventions, and most importantly, it is increasing the number and quality of teachers and support staff available. I urge DFID to do all it can to address the specific needs of children at each stage of education, starting with the early years and early child development, and taking into account both the obvious and less obvious barriers to education.

I welcome the Prime Minister’s commitment, reflected in the Queen’s Speech, to all girls having access to 12 years of quality education. The UK’s pledge at the recent UN General Assembly to higher investment in education is very positive, but we must as part of that address the particular needs of those who are disabled. I hope the Minister can provide assurances that children with disabilities will be front and centre in the Government’s efforts to secure 12 years of quality education in the Leave No Girl Behind initiative.

A key commitment of DFID’s at the disability summit was the inclusive education initiative, which aims to accelerate action by countries and to support their efforts in making education more inclusive. The initiative does this by helping Governments and other stakeholders to mobilise finance and develop programmes that ensure inclusive education. When he responds, will the Minister set out how the Government will build on the initial investment and, in particular, how we can bring other donors on board to maximise its impact?

Of course, it is important when implementing such programmes that we put pressure on national Governments to budget for the costs of disability inclusion in their planning. DFID agreed to the Committee’s recommendation that the Government should create a framework to ensure that programmes identify correctly the specific challenges in each host nation, and provide the technical guidance to deliver education projects that
address those challenges. National Governments should also be encouraged to plan and budget for disability inclusion in their own education programmes.

More broadly, disability should not be an obstacle to participation in economic and social life. We welcome the inclusion of social and economic empowerment as pillars of DFID’s strategy. This reflects the high living costs and barriers to healthcare, employment and other economic opportunities that people with disabilities face. As we know, a large majority of people with disabilities are either not employed or are under-employed. If they are in work, they earn lower wages than people without disabilities. For women with disabilities, gender inequality compounds that divide.

We have called on the Department to gather more evidence on the impact of poverty reduction on social protection programmes, and to work with Governments and stakeholders to fund and support the inclusion of people with disabilities in existing social protection schemes, or, where necessary, to develop appropriate new schemes targeted at the particular needs of disabled people. The Department should also ensure that disability inclusion is mainstreamed throughout its economic development programming. Clearly, one of the most important opportunities for disabled people is to set up their own business, to get work, and to get the training that they need so that they have the skills required for the jobs of the future. Disability inclusion should also be an aspect of broader investment decisions, particularly by CDC, which should have a disability-inclusive approach to its investment.

Palladium, a contractor, said to us in evidence:

“Encouraging diversity in the supply chain by engagement of companies owned or led by people with disabilities and by encouraging programme implementers to do the same will increase economic empowerment and bring diversity of thought to DFID programming.”

People with disabilities should be assisted in overcoming skills gaps or accessibility issues that may prevent them getting work with DFID.

The disability strategy, alongside the summit, has provided a renewed focus on boosting disability inclusion. It has rightly been commended across the sector, but the progress needs to be sustained. As I implied, there is a concern that disability might not have the priority that it previously had in the Department, and that it was very much a personal priority of two previous Secretaries of State, but I am sure that the Minister will be able to reassure us that disability inclusion absolutely remains a top priority for the Department, so that we really do leave no one behind. I hope that the Department is scaling up its spending on disability-specific projects, while further embedding disability inclusion across the strategy and budget of DFID.

This is the final report that I will have the opportunity to present as Chair of the International Development Committee. I am very proud of the work that the Committee has done, but I am particularly proud of the work that my predecessor did on this issue, which contributed to disability being a higher priority in the Department’s work. That goes to the very heart of the sustainable development goals.

I want to finish by speaking about a project I have spoken about previously, because it is so impressive. Two years ago, the Committee went on a visit to education projects in east Africa, and the one that sticks in my memory is the Girls Education Challenge programme in Kisumu in Kenya, which is funded by DFID and run by Leonard Cheshire. We were so impressed by the programme, which is aimed at girls with disabilities, that we reflected, on a cross-party basis, that we wanted more of those sorts of programmes to be funded by DFID. We also want DFID to act as a catalyst to enable Governments in countries such as Kenya to spread the very best practice—like what we saw in Kisumu—through their countries. It felt to me as if the very best of UK aid was reaching those who are often left furthest behind, and that it was also giving UK taxpayers the best value for money.

I applaud the Department for using its influence to shine a light on the needs of disabled children, just as it has successfully shone a light on the needs of girls and young women. UK aid should be about not just removing barriers but supporting people with disabilities to thrive in every facet of life. There is no surely no better example of leaving no one behind than enabling every child to go to school and every adult to participate in economic and social life and, perhaps above all, ensuring that the voices of disabled people are heard, listened to and acted on.

3.21 pm

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans. It is also a great honour to follow the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg)—the two years I spent on the Select Committee under his chairmanship were among of the most enjoyable of my time in Parliament. He has been a great Chair of the Committee and it is the House’s loss that he is standing down. However, I am sure that he will make a huge contribution to the area in question in his future career, wherever that will be.

I declare an interest as a board member of the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine. I want to talk about neglected tropical diseases, an area in which the school does great work, which is why I am declaring that interest. I am also chair of the all-party parliamentary group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases.

I want to pay tribute to the hon. Member for Wirral South (Alison McGovern). I seem to remember that in the 2010 to 2015 Parliament, when we produced the first report on DFID and disability, she was one of the main instigators of work in that area, along with my hon. Friend the Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) and myself.

There are three areas that I want to address: neglected tropical diseases, jobs in the private sector, and nutrition. All of those have a strong relationship with disability and DFID’s work on it. Neglected tropical diseases are those that, as the name suggests, have been neglected, but I am glad to say that they are much less neglected than they used to be, because of the strong work done by many around the world—not least DFID and the United States, and increasingly now other countries, such as Germany.

It was a great honour when I recently chaired a meeting of the all-party group where we helped to publicise DFID’s new programme on accelerating the sustainable control and elimination of neglected tropical diseases. ASCEND covers five of the worst diseases:
trachoma, lymphatic filariasis, onchocerciasis, schistosomiasis and visceral leishmaniasis. There are two programmes within ASCEND—one covering east and central Africa and one covering west Africa. The programme aims to accelerate sustainable control and elimination of neglected tropical diseases and is spending £200 million over the period between this September and March 2022.

The work that I have seen on tackling neglected tropical diseases, particularly in Africa but also elsewhere, is not only essential but incredibly cost-effective. DFID did an evaluation of work on NTDs and said that it paid back something like £30 or more for every £1 spent. Why is that relevant to disability? It is simple: those diseases, even if people are treated for them, lead to disability, or in some cases they cause disability that can then almost be cured by the treatments.

A few weeks ago I had the honour of visiting, with the hon. Member for Stockton South (Dr Williams), a clinic in Rombo in east Kilimanjaro, where we saw surgery being performed on people’s eyelids, through the Commonwealth Fund and with the help of Sightsavers and DFID. The people had a condition that almost removed their eyesight, but after a few days they could see much better. It was wonderful, because often those were people in their 60s, 70s or 80s—there was even one woman in her 90s—and they were suddenly given a new lease of life and could perform tasks that they could not perform before, because of that simple but hugely beneficial operation.

Another great thing about that experience was that I saw the ophthalmic surgeon not only performing the operation but teaching two highly skilled nurses how to do it; it was training as well as an operation. What gave me great joy was the fact that at the end I shook the surgeon’s hand and he asked my name. When I gave it he said, “Are you related to Dr Lefroy?” I said, “Yes, she’s my wife.” He said, “She trained me at the medical school in Kilimanjaro, the best part of 20 years ago.” It was lovely to see the link between the work that Janet did all those years ago, training a young man who is now an experienced eye surgeon and who also trains experienced eye nurses. That gave me great joy, but probably not as much as seeing those men and women undergoing a quite difficult operation with great fortitude and stoicism, having their eyes bandaged, and then moving out, knowing that in two or three days’ time their lives would be made a lot better by being able to see. They would be able to perform jobs and tasks, and engage in activities that they would not otherwise have been able to do.

I remember a second visit, a few years ago, just south of Dar es Salaam in Tanzania, where we saw a programme, also with DFID funding, working together with the Tanzanian Government. The point I would make is that those programmes are working together with the Government in health facilities supported by the Government, whether they are faith-based or Government-owned. They are integrated into the Government system. They are supported by other organisations such as Sightsavers, which is excellent, as the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby has said, but they are integrated into the work that is already going on.

The programme I saw was tackling lymphatic filariasis, otherwise known as elephantiasis. It is a very disabling disease and, as the name suggests, it causes the swelling of limbs. People were being taught how to look after and treat their condition so that they would be able to work again. The other element of the programme was to take away some of the stigma. As the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby has said, stigma is a big issue in connection with disability, and there is great stigma attached to lymphatic filariasis.

I want to praise the work that DFID, its partners and others in the sector are doing, and to encourage the United Kingdom to continue the work. The programme is worth about £60 million to £70 million a year, and it has a huge impact. If one considers that the number of people affected by NTDs around the world is in the order of 1.4 billion—these programmes are helping hundreds of millions to cope with disabilities, and are treating and preventing disabilities—one can see how important that work is.

The second area that I would like to tackle is jobs and livelihoods. The report is very good on that, and section 113 and those following it talk about the private sector. Again, I have personal experience of this, as my father was disabled. His disability came in his mid-30s, and he found it very difficult to get work. I pay great tribute to the Church of England, because he was a vicar and it supported him. Understandably, in the 1960s he found it very difficult to find places that would accept somebody who was disabled. Nevertheless, he was supported right the way through by the congregations he served in London, which in those days was quite unusual.

From that experience, I have always wanted the United Kingdom to take a lead in disability support within the workplace, particularly within the private sector. I was very encouraged by the example given in the report of the hotel chain ITC Welcom Group, which has produced a disability handbook for industry. It argues that employees with disabilities “tend to have better attendance records, stay with employers longer and have fewer accidents at work”.

It highlights other important benefits, such as improving the company image and boosting staff morale. That applies in the United Kingdom and across the world. I welcome DFID’s work, together with that of its private equity arm, CDC, in putting that at the forefront of their work.

Nutrition does not feature highly in the report, but I fully understand that not everything can be covered. Just last week I was talking to the head of the World Food Programme for Burundi, where 56% of the population are malnourished. It is one of the poorest countries in the world, but sadly, because of the serious problems with governance there, it has been neglected by the international community. I know that the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby shares that view. I encourage DFID to strengthen its support in Burundi.

The point is that if we do not support babies and children in the first 1,000 days—this is shown by work that DFID has done on nutrition, the work that Melinda Gates has done on the issue, and the work of my hon. Friend the Member for Worthing West (Sir Peter Bottomley) and others in this country—the problems last for the rest of their lives. If babies, children and young people do not have access to adequate nutrition, they will be much more susceptible to acquiring disabilities, either at a young age or later. Will the Minister address the issue of Burundi, where I believe there is a hidden
nutrition crisis—indeed, more than a crisis? I know he is aware of that, but what can we do about it? How is DFID’s work on nutrition, which is of the highest order, feeding into its work on disability?

I am most grateful for this opportunity to speak. I am very grateful for the work that DFID is doing in these areas. I encourage the Minister and the whole Department to make further progress on their work with disability, but I thank them for what they have done over the past five years, moving from the framework to the strategy, and for taking a leading role in this most important of areas.

3.34 pm

Mr Jonathan Lord (Woking) (Con): It is an enormous pleasure to follow my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy). It is a great sadness to many of us that he has decided to stand down from this place. His speech demonstrated to us in a very real way the things that inspire him in politics. It was a vision of compassion, of looking outwards and of helping others. I know that he will not mind me saying that it was also inspired by his Christian faith. We will miss him very much in this place. We thank him for all his efforts in the arena of international development, and on the other issues that he has taken up in this House.

I also pay tribute briefly to the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg), who has chaired the International Development Committee extremely well. As I think he knows, he is not only very well respected across the House, but very well liked. We will certainly miss him too. I wish him well for the future.

I wanted to speak for two reasons. In general terms, our country is grappling with its future place in the world, and perhaps some of our friends around the world, and indeed our enemies, are wondering whether the UK will regain a surer footing on its vision for the future. The work that this country does, ably led by our Department for International Development, in trying to alleviate poverty and suffering around the world, gives a strong signal—it is perhaps not publicised widely enough or known about—to all the countries around the world that might be harbouring one or two doubts about the political difficulties of the past couple of years. It gives a powerful signal that this country stands for the right values, is compassionate and wants to have a leading, positive role in the world.

I am proud that my town and borough of Woking proactively decided to take in Syrian refugees. I am able to report to the House that it has worked extremely well. Some of the refugees had severe health and disability issues. I pay tribute to the efforts of our local national health service’s efforts in giving them the help and support they needed. I also pay tribute to our local mosques, particularly the Shah Jahan mosque, and our Christian churches, which rallied around those people, who had come from a terrible war-torn situation. Many of them had very difficult personal stories of what they and their families had been through. It was very moving when many of those refugees, who are now fully settled—most are looking forward to a future in this country, but if they wish to return they will be helped to do so—decided to cook a feast at the end of Eid and invite the community, particularly the faith communities from the mosque and our churches, to celebrate together. They made it clear how thankful and grateful they were to the churches, the mosque and the wider Woking community for giving them such a warm welcome after their times of trouble.

I will not detain hon. Members any longer. The work that our Department for International Development does is very valuable around the world. It is important that the International Development Committee scrutinises it and encourages it in its efforts; we thank the Committee for its work. I hope that the Minister will tell us in his response a little more about this country’s international development efforts to help and support people from conflict zones, such as Syria and Yemen. The House would be grateful to hear more about its work in those areas.

3.39 pm

Alex Norris (Nottingham North) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairship, Mr Evans, and to respond for the Opposition on a very important and impactful report, to which many hon. Members have contributed, not least yourself as a member of that Committee. The report is clearly the culmination of the Committee’s work and focus spanning several chairships, and as my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) said, it will be his final report. The Committee’s work will continue to make a difference.

I pay tribute to my hon. Friend—he is my friend—for whom I have considerable admiration and lots of respect. I believe that that view is shared not just among Labour Members, but by hon. Members across the House, who know that he is a man of great integrity, personal character and obvious and clear talent, and that he is fundamentally a very decent person. As we know, there is lots of room for that across the House. In that spirit, I would say that I am sad to see him go, but he will only be a phone call away, so I will still be able to ask him daft questions which he will take in the spirit in which they are asked. I will not take my tribute any further because I know that that is not what he wants, but it was important to say that. The report is excellent and it is characteristic of my hon. Friend’s time as Committee Chair and of the excellent colleagues who served with him.

It was impossible not to be moved and struck by the story about east Kilimanjaro told by the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy). If ever there were a story that characterised a small world, that is it. It also made a really important point about Britain’s future place in the world and the importance of being generous with our knowledge, whether in medicine, as in this case, in sciences, as we talk about tackling climate change globally, in nutrition, in farming and so on. We have an awful lot of expertise and excellent academic institutions in this country, and we have lived experience as well. We ought to be really generous with how we share that. If we do, we can make a really big impact. We will always talk about aid in terms of the 0.7% of GDP commitment, which is exceptionally important, but sharing knowledge is a soft way of contributing even more, and that is really important.

The hon. Member for Stafford also made a point about jobs. I often say that my love for development stems from my view of the world. The things that I want for my community are the things I want for the rest of the world. His point about employment and employers is really important. In Nottingham, when that has been...
done well, it has been transformative for people and businesses, but when it has been done poorly it has had quite the opposite impact, and that applies around the world. I hope that we can be generous in the way that we support others to do as well as they can. I wish the hon. Gentleman very well in the future.

The hon. Member for Woking (Mr Lord) spoke about Britain’s place in the world, which chimed with the previous contributions. He mentioned the Syrian refugee programme, and I do not think I would be too bold to say that there was a universal sense across all communities of just how good that scheme was, and how much communities stepped up and rallied around. We are very proud of that in Woking, too.

We should not be shy of acknowledging the importance of faith communities in such schemes. Whatever their faith, people from faith communities in my constituency make a massive impact on a daily basis for those who have the least. They do that because they think it important. I suspect that other hon. Members will agree that when the road is long from visiting projects, and we are having difficult days, seeing those schemes and meeting those people fills our hearts and sends us off with a spring in our steps. We should not miss the opportunity to highlight and trumpet that work whenever we can.

As my hon. Friend said, 1 billion people—almost one in eight globally—live with disabilities. Among the poorest people in the world, that number is one in five, and rising. Including people with disabilities in development and humanitarian interventions is not a side issue; it directly affects millions of people in fundamental ways. I commend DFID for the global leadership that it has shown on this issue in recent years. Our leadership has been bold in saying that the commitment to the DFID’s disability agenda and political will on disability should not be lost. I welcome the Government’s agreement with the report’s recommendation 29, to better include people living with disabilities in its humanitarian interventions. Whether in conflict, in the climate crisis or in humanitarian crises, people living with disabilities are by definition the most vulnerable and at risk of being forgotten and/or excluded. Inclusion or exclusion can be the difference between life or death.

We know that conflict causes disabilities, life-changing injuries and trauma, and that over 90% of the casualties of such conflicts are civilians. It is therefore good and important that in Vienna, countries agreed to work together towards a new international political declaration to stop the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. Do the UK Government support those efforts unconditionally, and if not, why not? We have to accept our own place within that. We must accept that if there is any sense that British-made bombs have caused these problems, that undermines the case that we make in our communities about the importance of British aid and helping people with disabilities. That is an inconvenient truth, but one that we must not lose from this conversation.

Thirdly and finally, there must be coherence between our international and domestic approaches. In the Government’s responses to recommendations 19, 20 and 21, they affirm that DFID will want to strengthen the access of people with disabilities to social protection in developing countries, and in some cases, agree to go further in the future. There is the challenge of that not chiming with constituents who contact me about experience at home. We of course know from the UN Committee on the Rights of Persons with Disabilities about some of the challenges in this country. Those are issues for the next six weeks, so I will not go any further than that, but there will be a challenge for us on the credibility of both public policy and aid policy, which is so important, if we do not demonstrate that we are practising and preaching at home the values that we believe in and hold globally. That is exceptionally important, and I would be interested to hear the Minister’s response.

I thank you, Mr Evans, for chairing the debate and hon. Members for their contributions. I thank the hon. Member for Stafford and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby for everything that they have done, and for their leadership. We stand on their shoulders. I find it comforting to be able to say that, and we wish them nothing but the best in the future.

3.49 pm

The Minister of State, Department for International Development (Andrew Stephenson): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Evans, for what I think is the first time. It is good to see my constituency neighbour in the Chair.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) on securing the debate, and I thank International Development Committee members for their long-standing interest in disability-inclusive development. I have made disability a real priority. I want to do and of the leadership that it can show at home and abroad. On behalf of the Opposition, I put on record my thanks to International Development Committee members and the previous contributions. He mentioned the Syrian refugee programme, and I do not think I would be too bold to say that there was a universal sense across all communities of just how good that scheme was, and how much communities stepped up and rallied around. We are very proud of that in Woking; it is clearly the case in Woking, too.

We should not be shy of acknowledging the importance of faith communities in such schemes. Whatever their faith, people from faith communities in my constituency make a massive impact on a daily basis for those who have the least. They do that because they think it important. I suspect that other hon. Members will agree that when the road is long from visiting projects, and we are having difficult days, seeing those schemes and meeting those people fills our hearts and sends us off with a spring in our steps. We should not miss the opportunity to highlight and trumpet that work whenever we can.

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I would be interested to hear the Minister’s reflections on three points. First, as my hon. Friend said, momentum and political will on disability should not be lost. I welcome the Government’s agreement with the report’s first recommendation on developing a robust accountability mechanism for commitments made at the global disability summit in July 2018. A significant amount of time has passed since that summit, and once the election period is over, it will have been 18 months. The mechanism is not likely to be in place until 2020. We risk losing a bit of momentum from the summit. Will the Minister tell us what is taking so long? Can he elaborate on what the plans and timing are, and whether a follow-up summit is planned in due course?

As my hon. Friend said, there has been significant political change in the Department in recent years. Obviously, there have been four Secretaries of State, two of whom—the right hon. Members for Witham (Priti Patel) and for Portsmouth North (Penny Mordaunt)—have made disability a real priority. I want Ministers to make it clear today that this is a departmental priority, not just a priority of individuals; that this will not relate to the politics of the day; and that any future changes will not mean that this will be lost as a priority. It is important to have that clarity on the record.

Secondly, it is important that we talk positively about the impact that businesses have in this area, but also reference some of the risks involved in that, and our part in the world and in global trade in future. I welcome DFID’s work, set out in its response to recommendation 29, to better include people living with disabilities in its humanitarian interventions. Whether in conflict, in the climate crisis or in humanitarian crises, people living with disabilities are by definition the most vulnerable and at risk of being forgotten and/or excluded. Inclusion or exclusion can be the difference between life or death.

We know that conflict causes disabilities, life-changing injuries and trauma, and that over 90% of the casualties of such conflicts are civilians. It is therefore good and important that in Vienna, countries agreed to work together towards a new international political declaration to stop the use of explosive weapons in populated areas. Do the UK Government support those efforts unconditionally, and if not, why not? We have to accept our own place within that. We must accept that if there is any sense that British-made bombs have caused these problems, that undermines the case that we make in our communities about the importance of British aid and helping people with disabilities. That is an inconvenient truth, but one that we must not lose from this conversation.

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I thank you, Mr Evans, for chairing the debate and hon. Members for their contributions. I thank the hon. Member for Stafford and my hon. Friend the Member for Liverpool, West Derby for everything that they have done, and for their leadership. We stand on their shoulders. I find it comforting to be able to say that, and we wish them nothing but the best in the future.
Development. They have consistently shown strong support and leadership on this issue. Their most recent report will be an invaluable contribution to our achieving our ambition. I thank my hon. Friends the Members for Woking (Mr Lord) and for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) and the hon. Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) for their informed and thoughtful contributions.

Disability inclusion is a top priority for DFID and will remain so. Momentum is building, but we recognise that we have to do more. The world will not achieve the sustainable development goals, or deliver its commitment to leaving no one behind, without a sustained, concerted effort to include people with disabilities at all stages of their lives.

Disability inclusion is a neglected issue internationally. Although 180 countries have ratified the UN convention on the rights of persons with disabilities, implementation is slow. There are an estimated 1 billion people with disabilities globally; 80% of people with disabilities live in developing countries. People with disabilities are poorer than their non-disabled peers, in terms of access to education, healthcare, employment, social support and civic involvement. As the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby, said, the differences are particularly stark in education; more than half of the 65 million children with disabilities in low and middle-income countries are not in school.

I will add some personal reflections. In 2008 I had the privilege of attending the Paralympics in Beijing to watch my university friend Helene Raynsford win gold in the women’s single sculls. I remember the event vividly, but I also remember being told how the Paralympics had helped transform Beijing from a city that was almost totally inaccessible to disabled people to one ready to welcome disabled people from across the globe.

More recently, last month I met Charlotte Frost and Joshua Hartley, two International Citizen Service volunteers from Barnoldswick in my constituency. In 2018 Joshua spent three months in Ghana volunteering on a disability project for people with visual impairments. After that, he returned to his job at Pendle Borough Council and helped set up a goalball team—a sport designed for people with visual impairments—in Blackburn. That is a great example of a DFID-funded project benefitting disabled people in a developing country, and bringing knowledge and learning back to the UK.

Without efforts to reduce barriers, many people with disabilities would be trapped in poverty. We know that women and girls with disabilities are even more marginalised and discriminated against because of their gender as well as their disability. That is why this issue is so important. If we are to deliver real change for people with disabilities, we all need to fundamentally change the way we do business.

We are pleased that the Committee concludes from its assessment that DFID is making good progress on this aim. We were particularly pleased to see that its report commend our leadership on the global disability summit in 2018, and supports our five-year disability inclusion strategy. That gives us renewed confidence that the strategy, published in December last year, will achieve real and tangible outcomes for people with disabilities. The strategy includes time-bound commitments over the next five years, and sets out how we will mainstream disability inclusion in DFID’s systems, structures and culture.

DFID agrees with the vast majority of the recommendations in the report. We recognise that this is a long-term, complex agenda, and the recommendations will help shape our future direction. Our priority is to continue to be a leading light in disability inclusion. I will highlight four main areas where we will continue to do this. The first is in leadership and culture. Leadership on this issue is essential—not just senior leadership or leadership from Ministers, but leadership throughout the organisation. A number of Members have commented on the personal commitment of the previous Secretary of State to this issue. I was pleased that the Secretary of State reconfirmed last week to the Committee that disability inclusion is a top priority for DFID.

Our worldwide network of 67 disability champions will continue to share best practice and inspire action. We are supporting offices in undertaking stock-takes and implementing actions plans to embed disability inclusion properly in their systems and structures. Of the 52 offices that completed a recent self-assessment, 48 indicated that they were on track or had achieved the standard for creating an inclusive office culture.

Secondly, we must focus on getting the right expertise to deliver our agenda. The Committee made a number of recommendations on improving the diversity and skills of our staff, with which we fully agree. We strongly believe that people with disabilities should be at the forefront of DFID’s work. We are working with human resources to improve access and opportunities for people with disabilities. That is happening alongside DFID’s wider efforts in areas such as gender equality and race.

To deliver on the strategy, we need to develop the technical skills of our staff in the UK and in our country offices. Alongside a dedicated helpdesk, we are developing an interactive resource site containing detailed guidance notes, tools and advice to support the roll-out of the strategy. Our central team provides bespoke support to country offices, especially those working towards high achievement standards. Our offer also includes training courses for staff on specialist topics such as mental health. That is already having an impact. We have seen a significant rise in the number of programmes marked as disability inclusive, from 19% in November 2017 to over 31% now.

For example, in Jordan, assistive technology is being integrated in humanitarian programming. People with disabilities are being provided with assistive devices, such as crutches, wheelchairs and prosthetic limbs. Through the Girls Education Challenge, mentioned by the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby, we have helped over 46,000 girls with disabilities receive an education in countries including Kenya, Uganda, Tanzania and Zimbabwe.

Thirdly, we recognise that we cannot achieve outcomes for people with disabilities by working alone. We must work in partnership with others and continue to bring new actors to the fore; that was a success at the global disability summit. We agree with the Committee’s recommendations on working with the private sector and deepening our relationships with country Governments. DFID is uniquely placed to influence other organisations and drive up standards in the sector. We welcomed the
Our £37-million disability-inclusive development programme, what works and how to reach the most marginalised. The plan, released in March 2019, articulates how we will measure our impact. Our inclusive data charter action Group questions are an important tool to improve on disability-inclusive development. The Washington evidence on what works will be a key part of our work the responsibility of us all to embrace the disability area across DFID; country offices routinely consult with disabled people's organisations. Through our disability catalyst programme, we are working with the International Disability Alliance and the Disability Rights Fund to build the capacity of disabled people's organisations. We fully agree with the Committee's recommendation that we should continue to advance this work. It remains the responsibility of us all to embrace the disability movement's principle, "nothing about us without us."

Finally, improving data collection and gathering rigorous evidence on what works will be a key part of our work on disability-inclusive development. The Washington Group questions are an important tool to improve measurement of disability. We are strengthening their use throughout our programming to ensure that we can measure our impact. Our inclusive data charter action plan, released in March 2019, articulates how we will gather high-quality data on people with disabilities.

We recognise that there are gaps in our knowledge of what works and how to reach the most marginalised. Our £37-million disability-inclusive development programme will deliver best-in-class research to address this. Working across a range of sectors, this programme will test a range of innovative solutions and then take them to scale.

We welcome the Committee's scrutiny of our activities, and are pleased that the recommendations are almost uniformly in line with our own thinking. We would like to express further thanks to the many civil society partners and stakeholders who contributed to the report.

I turn to the questions that Members asked. The hon. Member for Stafford, West Derby asked about economic development programming. That is one of the four pillars of the strategy. We know we need to close the employment gap, and have to work with the private sector to do that. For example, our RATE programme—the Responsible, Accountable and Transparent Enterprise programme—works with multinational and local businesses to be more accountable for poor workers, including people with disabilities. Our UK Aid Connect programme, run by Sightsavers in conjunction with Leonard Cheshire Disability, is also supporting thousands of people with disabilities in four countries.

The hon. Gentleman mentioned what we are doing with CDC to ensure that it focuses on disability and inclusion. CDC is working jointly with the World Bank to develop a good practice note in order to incentivise private sector companies to invest in making their work inclusive of people with disabilities. That was one of the commitments made at the global disability summit.

Once again, I thank the Committee for its continued interest in this area. We look forward to engaging further in the coming months and years. I thank all the Members who have spoken, particularly my hon. Friend the Member for Stafford. It is a huge shame and a great loss to this place that he is standing down. As was evidenced by his speech, and as he has shown in his many speeches over the years, he has a huge wealth of knowledge on topics in this area, such as neglected tropical diseases and all sorts of other things. My mind is often boggled by his depth of knowledge. I pay tribute to him for everything he has done for his constituents in Stafford, and on humanitarian issues, education and a range of issues over the years. I will take away his point about Burundi; we are spending £4.6 million in Burundi on education, sexual reproductive rights and humanitarian programmes run by partners. We have some challenges due to the EU sanctions that prevent us from giving money directly to the Burundi Government, but as a personal commitment to him, I am very keen to go away and look at what more we can do in that country.

Finally, on behalf of the Department for International Development, I pay tribute to the outgoing Chair of the Committee, the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby. I thank him for his service over the past four and a half years. In that time, I believe he has seen off five Secretaries of State and 13 junior Ministers, his Committee has published 28 reports, and he has found the time for 11 official country visits. He has been a prominent and tireless advocate for, among other things, global education, the safeguarding of beneficiaries, the implementation of the sustainable development goals and humanitarian action across the globe. I am sure he will enjoy his time away from this House, but he will undoubtedly be missed as a Member of it.

Mr Nigel Evans (in the Chair): Before I call Stephen Twigg to make his closing remarks, I thank everyone who has taken part in the debate. As a member of the Committee, I must say that this subject has been overlooked in the past, and I am delighted that it has been addressed in this report. It has been an honour and a joy to serve with the hon. Member for Liverpool, West Derby (Stephen Twigg) as Chair of the Committee. He is passionate about this subject and has shown great leadership throughout his tenure. I am sorry to see him go and I hope he will find a role somewhere outside this House, perhaps in a similar position.

It was an honour and a joy also to serve alongside the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) when he was a member of the Committee. He was absolutely dedicated; indeed, the only reason he is no longer a member is that he stood aside to allow another Member to take up his position, as there were no women on the Committee. That shows just how principled he is. I love the story about Janet—a wonderful, personal tribute to your wife and the legacy she has left behind. Thank you, Jeremy, and good luck for the future.

Stephen Twigg: Thank you, Mr Evans, not only for your chairmanship today but for your service on the Committee. I wish the Committee well in future. You anticipated one of the things I was going to say, as did the Minister. He made the point that in my four and a half years as Chair of the Committee, there have been
five Secretaries of State for International Development, but what has been striking has been our ability to work together, not just as a cross-party Committee but with Government Ministers. No matter who takes over as Secretary of State after the election, today’s debate has demonstrated the strong cross-party commitment from the Minister and the shadow Minister to disability at the heart of our approach to inclusive development.

Mr Evans, you mentioned that the hon. Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) stood aside from the Committee, which was a huge loss, to enable the hon. Member for Mid Derbyshire (Mrs Latham) to remain a member. I pay tribute to her; she has been a Committee member since 2010. She spoke up on sexual exploitation, abuse and harassment before the various issues were covered in the media last year. She has been a tenacious rapporteur on that issue and a passionate voice on other international development issues. I hope that when the new Parliament convenes, we shall not again be in a position where there is only one woman on a Committee of 11 in such an important area. We must ensure that Labour’s delegation on the Committee is not entirely male. We must have a more appropriate gender balance in this important area.

We have had an excellent debate. I join the tributes to the hon. Member for Stafford for his service to the House, the Liverpool School of Tropical Medicine and the all-party parliamentary group on malaria and neglected tropical diseases. In particular, I echo what he said about Burundi, which we took the opportunity to raise with the Minister when he appeared before us earlier this week.

The hon. Member for Woking (Mr Lord) made a passionate speech. In what he said about Syrian refugees, he spoke for all of us and for the best of this country, with that generosity of spirit. I hope that we can learn from that in our broader policy. After I became the Chair in 2015-16, the Committee’s first report was on the Syrian refugee crisis. One of our recommendations was that in taking vulnerable refugees in resettlement, the UK should absolutely focus on those with disabilities, so I welcome the local example from Woking. I also echo what he said in the context of the UK and Brexit. Whatever happens with Brexit, our commitment to development and humanitarian relief is an important part of our country’s soft power. As he said, our values of compassion, and of seeking and leading a positive role, should be at the heart of the approach.

My hon. Friend the Member for Nottingham North (Alex Norris) made several powerful points. We echo his point on the coherence of domestic and international policy, which is important in this area and others.

The Committee raised that in the context of the sustainable development goals because, as we know, the global goals are universal. They say that, yes, no one should be left behind because of their disability in sub-Saharan Africa, but neither should they be in Nottingham, Liverpool, Stafford, Woking or any of our constituencies. Achieving that coherence is an important challenge for every Government.

I was delighted to hear the Minister reaffirm once again that disability inclusion is a top priority for the Department and that, in his words, it will “continue to be a leading light”. That is hugely welcome.

I thank everyone for their kind words on the work I have done with the Committee. It would not have been possible without the other Committee members or, in particular, without the amazing staff and specialist support that the Committee gets from advisers and the hugely vibrant sector. As the Minister said, there are very strong NGO, business and academic sectors in this area, and we rely on them for the best evidence that we get as a Committee. He rightly reminded us of the point that comes so strongly from disability organisations: nothing about us without us. That is the message of the debate.

I hope that next Tuesday I will catch the Deputy Speaker’s eye when there will be an opportunity for valedictory speeches. I intend to say that it is so important that we maintain the consensus for our global engagement, for our commitment that 0.7% of gross national income goes to development, and for DFID as a stand-alone Department. I know that there is not unanimity in the House on those issues but I hope that, moving forward, the cross-party consensus will continue behind those commitments, which speak to our moral purpose and sense of mission as a country. As the hon. Member for Woking said, they enable us to be an influential player in the world, rooted in the best universal values that this country has long been committed to.

I thank the Minister for his response. I feel confident that disability inclusion will remain a priority for the British Government. I am equally confident that, whoever takes over from me as Chair, the Committee will continue to press whoever is in Government to ensure that that is the case.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.


4.10 pm

Sitting adjourned.
Welcome to the Chair, Mr Betts, for the final day of activity in this Parliament. I wanted to raise the issue of retail crime today because it is still an important issue, indeed, a key issue, and sadly is often overlooked. The British Retail Consortium, one of the major organisations representing retailers, estimates that the cost of spending by retailers on crime prevention and of losses to the industry as a result of crime is a staggering £1.9 billion each year. That £1.9 billion cost is passed on to us as consumers and is having a major impact on the ability of retailers, at a challenging time on high streets, to make a profit and ensure that they have a profitable and valued business.

Let us consider crime as a whole. More than £700 million has been lost through shoplifting—customer theft—an issue to which I shall return. That represents a 31% rise. Customer theft alone, and that represents a 31% rise. Some £163 million has been lost via fraud and £15 million via robbery. That is the very hard end of retail crime whereby people walk into shops with shotguns and knives and engage in physical violence—attack shop staff—but also threaten and take valuable resource from shopping. A further £3.4 million has been lost via criminal damage, which can involve people vandalising shops both in the evenings and during the daytime. That is a staggering amount of resource.

The Association of Convenience Stores, which represents 22,000 small shops, estimates that there is a £246 million cost to its sector from retail crime. That is £5,300 per store. Interestingly, there is in effect a 7p crime tax on the cost of an average shop in a convenience store. The cost is being passed on to the consumer—the customer.

My purpose today is to look at three issues. The first is progress on the consultation that we secured from the Home Office earlier this year to look at shop theft generally and at serious crime. Self-evidently, we are in an election period, but, if re-elected, as a Back Bencher I will continue to raise this issue, whoever is in government after 12 December, because it is important.

Let me start with the very important point that my hon. Friend the Member for Torfaen (Nick Thomas-Symonds) mentioned—attacks on shop staff. Today and every day, 115 retail staff will be attacked in their workplace while protecting the shopping offer on their retail premises, upholding the legislation that we in this House have passed—on solvents, knives, alcohol and tobacco—and preventing shoplifting in their stores. As my hon. Friend suggested, that is a traumatic event for members of staff. It puts pressure on their mental and physical health. It is not acceptable that 115 colleagues are attacked each day, particularly given that knives, for example, are increasingly a significant weapon on the streets. The industry itself is doing all it can to protect its staff in their workplaces by spending about £1 billion on crime prevention measures, but we are still in a position whereby we need to look at what measures we can put in place to support the staff who are upholding the legislation that we have passed in this House.

John Howell: The right hon. Gentleman talks about crime prevention measures. Does he not see that there is a difference between the large shops—the Sainsbury’s and so on of this world—and the smaller shops, the small businesses, which have great difficulty in coping with the costs of retail crime? Do we not need a differentiated approach for the two?

David Hanson: I am grateful to the hon. Gentleman. Everybody who runs a shop wants their staff to be protected. Large multinational retailers such as Tesco, the Co-op, Sainsbury’s and Asda are caring for their staff, but everybody who runs a shop, be it a corner shop, a one-person shop, or another kind of small shop, wants their staff to be protected at work. That is particularly
important when those staff are upholding the legislation that we have passed. When they are threatened by people who want to buy alcohol late at night or early in the morning, when they are threatened for refusing cigarette, solvent or knife sales and when they are threatened for taking action to try to stop shoplifters, it is imperative that we, as the society as a whole, look at what measures we can put in place to help support them.

The Co-op Group recently produced a report entitled “It’s not part of the job”: Violence and verbal abuse towards shop workers”. It shows clearly that violence against shop staff has long-term consequences for them and their communities. I know the Minister will know that this is a key issue, but it is one that we need to raise, recognise, and highlight, and we need to give a commitment to those staff on the ground to ensure that they are protected as a whole.

USDAW, which, like my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green), I am proud to be a member of—I declare my entry in the Register of Members’ Financial Interests—runs annually the Freedom from Fear campaign, and in the run-up to Christmas it will again run the Respect for Shopworkers campaign. Of the 6,725 shop workers surveyed by USDAW in the past year, 64% faced verbal abuse at work, 40% were threatened by a customer, and 280, on average, were assaulted every day. That is not acceptable.

I pay tribute to the Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department, the hon. Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), who previously dealt with this issue. We raised it during proceedings on the Offensive Weapons Act 2019. We tabled amendments and called for action in the form of a review of attacks on shop staff. The then Minister agreed to that review during a roundtable meeting with the Co-op, USDAW and other trade unions, the British Retail Consortium, the Association of Convenience Stores and the National Federation of Retail Newsagents. That review has been undertaken; it has taken evidence. There have been an awful lot of consultation responses. The previous Minister promised to respond to that evidence in the course of November. It is now November, so I wanted to put that on the record and get some feedback from the current Minister as to where we are with that action. We are in a politically divisive time, but I hope the Minister and his team see this as an important issue on which we can have cross-party co-operation. If he can tell us what he intends to do, if the Government are re-elected, that would be welcome. I know what I would like to do if Labour is elected as the next Government—we would take action—but it is important that we discuss these issues today.

Kate Green: Does my right hon. Friend agree that it would be helpful to understand, should the Minister’s party be returned to government, what its view is on the use of facial recognition technology, which has been tried in the Trafford Centre, but is controversial? It has the potential to address crime, but we need to know what protections would be in place for personal privacy.

David Hanson: My hon. Friend has put an important issue on the table for the Minister to respond to.

In June, 50 senior retail figures, chief executives of the UK’s most recognisable retailers, the general secretary of USDAW, the chief executive of the Charity Retail Association and the chief executive of the British Retail Consortium all signed a letter calling for legislation in response to the Government consultation. Can we hear about the consultation and the potential legislation, and about what the Government intend to do, so that we can make a judgment about that? Whoever wins this election—that is for the British people—we need to know what measures are in place to take this issue forward.

I met with the Charity Retail Association—not just retail shops as a whole—which wrote to me on 5 June:

“We look forward to joining your list of…organisations in your fight for better protection for shop workers from violence or abuse.”

I wrote to the Minister earlier this year on the consultation that he is now considering. He responded on 3 September:

“Early analysis suggests that, as you highlight in your letter, the vast majority of respondents believe that violence and abuse toward shop staff has increased in recent years and that many respondents are unaware of the measures and tools available to tackle it and provide support for victims.”

My challenge to the Minister is this. Given that those respondents believe violence and abuse has gone up, and they want to see action from the Government, what will the Government do?

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I thank my right hon. Friend for securing such an excellent debate. Having worked for USDAW for nearly 20 years, I have spoken to thousands of shop workers who have suffered abuse. They often felt that their employer was not doing enough to be on the side of their staff who were facing abuse. That has happened over decades. Does he agree that the Government should take a lead on this and make it clear that it is never right to abuse or threaten staff on the frontline?

David Hanson: I absolutely agree, and I pay tribute to my hon. Friend’s efforts in this area. It is right that the Government should do that. I am looking to the Minister to show political leadership on this. For example, 98% of the current police and crime commissioners’ policing plans make no reference to shop theft, 63% make no reference to business crime, 72% make no reference to prolific offending and 79% make no reference to addiction, drug treatment or drug recovery, which are key to preventing shop theft. What pressure will the Minister put on police and crime commissioners for their actions?

The Minister will probably have received a letter today, dated 1 November, from James Lowman, chief executive of the Association of Convenience Stores, supporting the broad thrust of this debate and the consultation, and asking for legislation. The key point from Mr Lowman’s letter that I want to put on the record is this. Since the Government’s consultation began—back through the autumn, summer and spring, to when it was launched—200,000 assaults have taken place on people working in the retail and wholesale sector, in their place of work, because of the issues that we have mentioned around shoplifting and shop theft, and the lack of prevention of those activities.

Mr Lowman makes the valid point that his organisation represents 33,500 shops, including the Co-op, BP petrol stations, Spar, Nisa and Londis—a whole range of
shops. They are united in their wish for a Government to take action on this issue and introduce legislation on shop theft and attacks on shop staff. I hope the Minister will give some indication on that in due course.

I also want to raise the issue of shoplifting as a whole. In the Anti-Social Behaviour, Crime and Policing Act 2014, the definition of shop theft was revisited. At the time, I was the shadow Police Minister. I objected to that change and we pressed the matter to a Division. “Stolen goods from shops” was defined as goods worth £200 or less, which meant that such cases would therefore not necessarily go to court. That has had a dramatic impact on shop theft. Someone could walk into a supermarket today and steal £199-worth of goods and potentially not face court, but instead face an out-of-court disposal. I happen to think that it is important that people go to court and face the consequences of their crime. We need to review the threshold.

I hope that my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) and her colleagues will be in the Minister’s position shortly. After this election, whoever the Minister is, they should review the £200 limit on shoplifting. It is causing, potentially, increased shoplifting, because people know there are few consequences to face, and the police do not follow up on that type of activity, because of their stretched resources—which is something we might come to.

Steve McCabe (Birmingham, Selly Oak) (Lab): I am grateful to my right hon. Friend, who has done so much in this area. I agree that reducing shoplifting to the status of a parking offence has sent entirely the wrong signal. Does he agree that one of the perverse effects has been on the insurance industry? The police will say, “You have insurance.” If a small retailer makes a claim, its insurance goes up and the customer pays more. The shoplifter is the one person getting away with it, but everyone else is paying for the crime.

David Hanson: That is another knock-on consequence of retail crime and emphasises the point I want to make to the Minister. This is not an inconsequential or victim-free crime. The victims of shop theft and shop retail crime are the staff on the frontline, who are upholding the law, the shop owners and businesses, who take a hit to their profits, the customers, who pay more, and the insurance companies and other businesses, as my hon. Friend the Member for Stretford and Urmston mentioned, which face the consequences of those actions.

Bill Esterson (Sefton Central) (Lab): I, too, congratulate my right hon. Friend on his brilliant work over the years to support shop workers and the way that he has tried to get the Government to change their approach to the law. The wider damage done by crimes against shop workers affects staff, businesses and, at a time when retail is struggling, communities. Does he agree that, for all those reasons, if this Government are re-elected, they must act? If the Labour party is elected to Government, we will take the action required.

David Hanson: I am not a Front Bench. My Front-Bench days are over by choice. I did the Minister’s job at that stage, who helped to protect victims from crime. I cannot speak for a future Labour Government, but I know that my hon. Friends the Members for Swansea East and for Sheffield, Heeley (Louise Haigh) and my right hon. Friend the Member for Hackney North and Stoke Newington (Ms Abbott) will put in place measures to improve policing and legislation to protect shop staff, and to reduce retail crime, which impacts badly across our community and remains a hidden crime.

I have mentioned the policing plan and the policing response. I make no criticism of the police for being unable to respond at the same level as in the past, because when there are 21,000 fewer police officers than there were 10 years ago, that puts pressure on the police. The Government have said they will introduce 20,000 new police officers. I would like to know from the Minister how many police officers have been recruited since that pledge was made. What is his plan for when those 20,000 will be recruited? Why is he still putting forward proposals to have fewer police officers than when I held his job 10 years ago? What priority will he put on ensuring that police forces tackle retail crime, supported by legislation? These are key issues in any forthcoming discussion on this subject.

Matt Western (Warwick and Leamington) (Lab): I, too, commend my right hon. Friend for the immense amount of work he has done over the years on this topic. Does he agree that policing is particularly relevant in rural areas, where we are seeing a massive loss in coverage by shops, particularly little independent shops? In my constituency of Warwick and Leamington, we have communities with a single shop—the one shop in the village—and they are the ones that are most vulnerable to retail crime.

David Hanson: They are, and as the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) said earlier, the additional costs of CCTV, head cameras, recording equipment or protective measures such as shutters fall disproportionately on smaller shops. When I was doing the Minister’s job, we had a scheme to support small businesses to prevent shop theft and other types of theft. I would like to hear what he proposes to do, should he be re-elected, on those issues.

I want to see the response to the consultation, I want to see more police officers on the street, and I want to see help and support to raise awareness of the importance of tackling this crime. However, much shop theft is also driven by alcohol or drug abuse and mental health issues. There is a real challenge for the Minister and the Government—again, I compare and contrast previous Governments with the current Government—in supporting those who face difficult challenges and whose shoplifting and shop theft, and maybe even their consequential violence, is linked to a problem that is solvable and that can be dealt with by society as a whole.

I simply make the point that in 2014, for example, there were 8,734 drug treatment orders in the community, but in 2018 there were only 4,889. The number of drug treatment orders given to serial offenders has almost halved in the five years between 2014 and 2019, while alcohol treatment orders have gone down from 5,900 to 3,300. People who needed a criminal justice outcome to their criminal activity—whether they are shoplifters or drug addicts—have to have the appropriate community-based solution of rehabilitation, and that should be sought.
[David Hanson]certainly takes them off the streets but does not necessarily rehabilitate them. Nevertheless, it is important that the Minister looks at how we can increase drug and alcohol treatment orders and the use of mental health orders for people in the community who are undertaking shoplifting because their treatment for alcohol or drugs is not being provided to the extent that it was. I know that my hon. Friend, the Member for Swansea East, the shadow Minister, will look at that.

Again, in my time as Police Minister—I am going back 10 years—we had a prevention strategy as well as a policing strategy. The strategy was about trying to deal with the alcohol and drug problems that were driving offences, in addition to liaising with police in the community who knew who the prolific and serial offenders were locally and taking action accordingly. It is quite possible to find someone who is involved in 10 shoplifting events a month. Reducing those 10 to one through a drug treatment order has a massive impact on the crimewave in a local community. The Minister needs to explain what the Government’s future plans are.

Finally, I want to touch on the issue of serious crime. We have talked about shoplifting, which is serious; we have talked about violence against staff, which is serious. Sadly, however, there has also been an upswin in armed robberies at petrol stations, post offices, shops and supermarkets. I believe that the National Crime Agency should be focusing on this issue, driving down armed robberies, breaking up gangs and working hard to identify perpetrators.

Although I do not have time to go into that issue in detail, I simply put to the Minister three final points. First, he needs to give us the Government’s response to the consultation. Shop staff, shop businesses and shop organisations are unanimous on the need for legislation and a Government response. He should now say what he is going to do, because I am sure that my hon. Friend the shadow Minister will say that Labour will act if we have a Waitrose and a Tesco, we also have a vast array of smaller businesses. In fact, the majority of the businesses in the high streets in both Henley and Thame are small shops, many of them family-owned, and they are my greatest concern in how we tackle this issue. I am not questioning anything that the right hon. Gentleman has said today, but I am merely pointing out that we need to consider the best approach.

For example, if we consider some of the suggestions that have been made, such as using CCTV or some of the other more developed techniques to control retail crime, we see that they are quite expensive for small and medium-sized businesses. I do not think that a strategy that just takes the whole of the retail sector and applies solutions right across the board is at all appropriate for smaller companies.

We all know, and the right hon. Gentleman made this point very acutely, that shoplifting affects the productivity and competitiveness of smaller shops. A few years ago, a study showed that even the smallest amount of shoplifting can have a major impact on the profitability of these shops. The effect is much greater than the percentage suggests, and that is particularly so in smaller shops where the margins are tighter. That is where we need to concentrate on tackling this crime.

I want to highlight several other issues. It could be said that credit card fraud is a problem just for the credit card companies, but it is not; it is also a problem for small and medium-sized retailers, and a much more joined-up approach to tackle that is essential. Allied with that is the use of mobile payment technologies. I know there are huge benefits to mobile payment technologies, and I acknowledge that I have taken advantage of those benefits in my own shopping, but we have to take a firm line in mitigating the risks of mobile payment technologies when it comes to the proposed solutions.

The points that have been raised about attacks on staff and shoppers are valid. We must do everything we can to protect those individuals. I have no experience of being attacked while out shopping, and I would like to keep it that way. I would like that not only for me, but for everyone who goes shopping. As the right hon. Gentleman pointed out, drug-related cultures have a keen impact on this issue, and that ties in with the...
statement he made about attacks on shops to get alcohol and cigarettes. The two are often linked, and we need to tackle them together to sort them out.

My final point is that it is despicable that anyone should target charity shops, which exist for charitable purposes, for theft. We should try to do anything we can to help them. If the right hon. Gentleman wishes to take forward a cross-party approach to the issue, then I am in. I am happy to work with him. He is a colleague of mine on the Justice Committee, so we have worked together enormously on these matters, including some of the justice issues he raised in his speech. I thank him for bringing this debate to the House.

10.2 am

Jack Dromey (Birmingham, Erdington) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson), who is a great parliamentarian and a great champion of shop workers. Like him, I declare the support I receive from USDAW and the GMB.

The first cost of violence against shop workers is the cost to shoppers. My right hon. Friend was right to refer to the work done by the Association of Convenience Stores, which suggested that 7p of the cost every time anyone shops is a consequence of violence against shop workers.

The second cost is the human cost of violence against shop workers. I will tell a story about when I was walking in my right hon. Friend’s giant footsteps as shadow policing Minister four years ago. I addressed the USDAW conference as part of its Freedom from Fear campaign, and alongside me was a shop manager who had worked for 15 years in a particular shop. One night, a group of youths came in and were very abusive towards a black security guard. The manager went over, managed it and they left. The following night, yet more of them came back. When the manager went to the security guard’s aid, because he was being attacked, he was himself attacked so violently that he died. Mercifully, he was resuscitated on the spot by the ambulance service. What was so heartbreaking was that he told a story about how he loved playing football with his son and loved going mountain biking. He said, “Jack, I’ll never be able to do that again.” He is a fine young man, and he is never able to do that again. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) rightly raised the impact of retail crime on small businesses in our communities. Looking at the small businesses, as well as the big retail concerns, in my constituency, we can see that Harrow is no longer a manufacturing town. The businesses based in Harrow are predominantly retail. Many of them work on very small margins, which he alluded to, and the significant increase in shoplifting has put some of those businesses at risk. I will come back to that in a moment.

What can we do? My right hon. Friend has focused on the need for action. First, shop workers are public servants. They are entitled to be treated with dignity and respect. Secondly, violence against shop workers needs to be properly and fully recognised in local police plans. The statistics read out earlier are shocking, but not entirely surprising if 21,000 police officers have been taken off the streets. The statistics need to be recognised in police plans. Thirdly, we need more prosecutions, sending an unmistakable message that those who commit violence against shop workers do so at their peril. Fourthly, a clear message needs to be sent by the law. On the one hand, there is the nonsense of the £200 limit—my right hon. Friend ably advocated for tackling that—but on the other, we have a legal framework with three categories of crime and culpability and 19 aggravating factors. We need a specific offence that sends an unmistakable message.

My right hon. Friend was also right about the importance of preventive measures. My experience is like his: some of those involved in shoplifting and violence are themselves vulnerable individuals and everything possible needs to be done to deter and deflect them from the path of crime, in particular crime against shop workers.

In conclusion, my right hon. Friend was right to make an appeal to Government. There is common ground that such crime is completely unacceptable, but we must be tough on this. It is being tackled with the urgency it deserves, including the crucially—resource and more prosecutions. I hope that when the Minister responds, he says, “We get it and we are determined to act.”

10.7 am

Gareth Thomas (Harrow West) (Lab/Co-op): I am grateful to you, Mr Betts, for giving me the opportunity to speak. Like others, I praise my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) for once again bringing the House's attention to this important issue. He rightly took time to praise USDAW, the campaigning union. It is a particularly strong campaigning union on this issue, and I acknowledge the financial support it gives me. He also rightly praised the work of the Co-operative Group, which I know well as a member of the Co-operative party. The work of USDAW and the Co-op Group has, in very different ways, served to push the issue up the political agenda, and long may that continue, given what little action has been taken to date.

The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) rightly raised the impact of retail crime on small businesses in our communities. Looking at the small businesses, as well as the big retail concerns, in my constituency, we can see that Harrow is no longer a manufacturing town. The businesses based in Harrow are predominantly retail. Many of them work on very small margins, which he alluded to, and the significant increase in shoplifting has put some of those businesses at risk. I will come back to that in a moment.

As my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn set out, the rise in violence has had a profound impact on many of those who work in our shops. They are public servants, as my hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) rightly said, and they deserve the protection of all of us in this place. Retail crime impacts not only on the individual shop worker or business, but on our communities. There is a sense that the area is less safe to enjoy and that businesses might leave, and the strength of district shopping centres is deteriorating, which is what drew me to this debate. During a conversation with a manager, I was staggered to hear that, in the 18 months following the announcement that the major police station in my constituency would be closed, there was a 20% increase in shoplifting. According to UKCrimeStats, the number of shoplifting
offences in my constituency since 2011-12 has trebled, which is a remarkable increase, by any stretch of the imagination.

My right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn rightly raised the issue of violent crime. In my constituency, the number of violent incidents has almost doubled, which is hardly surprising given that considerable cuts to Metropolitan police funding have resulted in 30% of police officers disappearing from the streets of Harrow since 2010. We need stronger deterrents against attacks on retail workers. I join my right hon. Friend in urging the Government to update us on the scale of the responses to the call for evidence that closed in June. I remain strongly of the view that we need a clear deterrent against violence in shops. I do not understand why a specific offence cannot be created. It is staggering that the losses resulting from retail crime and the counter-crime prevention measures that businesses have to take amount to almost £2 billion. Mothercare is the latest example of a major chain potentially having to go into administration, and that brings home the scale of the impact not only on individual members of staff, but on our communities.

Finally, I have two specific points. An extra £1 million from the Metropolitan police budget for Harrow West would enable a return to the ward-based teams of a sergeant, two police constables and three police community support officers, who could gather intelligence about crime within our area, find out who is committing it, and react more quickly when retail crime takes place. Our courts need more resources to handle cases more quickly. Working with police and crime commissioners, they need to be able to direct efforts to tackle the root causes behind some of the retail crime, including the drug dependency and mental health issues that others have mentioned.

10.13 am

Dr David Drew (Stroud) (Lab/Co-op): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on outlining the major points.

I want to say one thing to the Minister: the £200 de minimis level is now so counterproductive that it is causing as many problems as it solves. I accept that it is not easy to get a prosecution. It has to go through the police and the Crown Prosecution Service, but the problem now, as was said earlier—and I have talked to numerous people—is that I face losing shops. Perhaps £200 does not sound much, but a succession of £200 losses causes difficulties because the same businesses get hit time after time. I have had instances where people who take whatever they take wave at the CCTV camera on the way out, and a member of the shop’s staff has to decide whether to intervene, with the possibility of violence against them, or allow the perpetrator to leave. That is why the £200 de minimis level is wrong. If someone steals, they should face the possibility of prosecution, no matter what the shop’s circumstances are. It is particularly problematic for smaller shops, because they are hit much more regularly. The bigger shops have the means to bear down and prosecute in their own right if the police choose not to prosecute.

I want to commend two organisations. The all-party parliamentary group on retail crime has been very valuable. There are many all-party groups. They spread themselves around and dilute our ability to do things, but the APPG on retail crime has been valuable. I am close to the Association of Convenience Stores. I have met representatives on many occasions, and I am told that shops in Stroud have lost an estimated £184,816 because of retail crime. The appeal has to be made to police and crime commissioners, although they cannot deal with the operational stuff. We have a very good police and crime commissioner in Gloucestershire. Martin Surl has taken up this issue and made it clear that he will be supportive, but we lack police numbers. Far too often the police either do not turn up at all or they turn up very late. They are incredibly sympathetic because they know what has happened and they know about the impact on the owners and staff, but they say it is impossible to do much about it.

We need to get rid of the de minimis level. We have to be tough on crime and tough on the causes of crime, as was said some years ago. All the issues to do with mental health and drug and alcohol abuse are integrated into the whole problem, but we cannot allow the crimes to carry on, or most of our convenience stores will disappear. That would be tragic in a rural area, because that store is often the last shop in the village, and such stores serve a community purpose. Can we therefore get rid of the £200 de minimis level? If the Minister agrees, I will be happy as I go through the election.

10.16 am

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is a pleasure to speak in this debate, Mr Betts. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on securing it. There are not many debates in Westminster Hall when he and I are not together, and I am very pleased to participate in this one, so I thank him for securing it. I also thank him for all the hard work he did when he was a Northern Ireland Minister and I was on the council—which was not yesterday.

As I have previously highlighted in this Chamber, although the costs in my constituency are not massive, retail crime does have massive consequences. Whether someone steals biscuits from the local pound shop or creates and distributes fake money in the lead-up to Christmas, it affects our local businesses.

Over the weekend, a shop in the town centre of Newtownards contacted me about a spate of petty crime involving the theft of alcohol. Such crimes are committed by young men who do indeed wave to the CCTV camera on the way out. They seem oblivious to the possibility of getting caught, although they have changed their tactics slightly and now use young girls to go and do the same thing. The shop staff are fearful of stopping them. The ladies who mostly man the counters are reluctant to try to detain someone, for fear of violence. They did not sign up to confront people, but to work in the store and do what they do. The Library has supplied information. The issue of the £200, which the hon. Member for Stroud (Dr Drew) and others have mentioned, needs to be addressed.

The businesses on our high streets need every penny they can earn. I encourage people to shop locally when possible. I once saw a sign saying that research showed that £10 spent in a local independent shop means that up to an additional £50 goes back into the local economy. That is simply because those shop owners put the
money we spend back into the local community by going to local pubs and restaurants and so on, thus circulating the money and allowing the community to thrive. Some of us shop locally to sow into our local economy, so retail crime is a local issue. People abuse and steal from their own community and it cannot be tolerated.

The Business Crime Partnership launched its business crime survey in September. I look forward to reading the responses. I agree with the development manager of the Federation of Small Businesses Northern Ireland, Mairaid McMahon, who said:

“Crimes against small firms, contrary to what some may think, are certainly not ‘victimless’. The average cost of a crime to a business is almost £3,000... and when additional negative impacts such as reputational damage, lost time and delayed business activity are factored in, it quickly adds up to a significant barrier to growth, or in the worst cases a threat to their survival.”

That is certainly what it means for small shops. She went on to say:

“Having worked with the Business Crime Partnership we know that tackling these crimes are a priority for the justice system, but we need a stronger evidence base to ensure that resources are being targeted effectively. We encourage all businesses to complete the Survey to enable us to capture the true impact of these crimes right across Northern Ireland.”

If the Minister remains in post after the election, perhaps he could look at that survey and factor it into the process.

Aodhán Connolly, the director of the Northern Ireland Retail Consortium said:

“For our members the combined cost of spending on crime prevention and losses from crime to the retail industry across the UK is substantial and more importantly every day, including weekends, 115 colleagues are attacked, with many more threatened. That is why we are members of the Northern Ireland Business Crime Partnership, to make NI a safer and more competitive place to do business and that is why we are encouraging retailers and all businesses to fill in this survey.”

In short, fill in the survey, ensure that the information is there, and work off the back of that evidentially. He went on to say:

“To fight crime we need to understand how, when and where it is happening and that’s how you can help shape the response to business crime.”

This is an issue for our local businesses. To keep the high street thriving, businesses must be able to pay their bills and wages, and that can happen only if we cut down on retail crime, working hand in hand with the local police force. I was glad to hear that funding will be released for more community policing. That means that officers will be able to arrive quickly at the scenes of crimes, and it sends the message that these small crimes will not be tolerated and that prosecuting them is a priority. We must do all we can to keep our high streets thriving and our local people in employment.

I am proud that I can honestly say that I have never been to the shop floor when cash or stock was lost through theft; or, worst of all, fear of what may happen; fear that they may be fired from a cruel so-called flexible or zero-hours contract for being the member of staff on the shop floor when cash or stock was lost through theft; or, worst of all, fear of what happens if the police are unable to respond to the incident.

The Government can and must do more, and commit to providing greater protection for retail workers. Constant cuts to police numbers and resources over the past decade—21,000 police officers lost since 2010—with police officer numbers at their lowest levels since the 1980s, have stretched our local police beyond measure and forced such immense pressure on them that they simply cannot attend to incidents being reported. They cannot always maintain visibility in the community, with a presence in town centres or high streets, to protect and reassure retail workers and to deter potential criminals from committing an offence in the first place.

Cuts to our local councils have meant that there is now
even less funding for them to work with the police and other partners to manage antisocial behaviour and reduce crime, and there are fewer youth workers, social workers and education welfare officers to work with people to ensure that they never turn to crimes such as shoplifting and vandalism.

Retail crime is a serious issue across the country. According to new national crime statistics, in my constituency of Merthyr Tydfil and Rhymney 567 incidents of shoplifting were reported over the past year. Tory cuts to my local police forces, South Wales Police and Gwent Police, have had a devastating impact on the ability of officers to prevent incidents of retail crime, as they are already stretched in so many other areas. A good number of local schemes are in operation in our communities to prevent and tackle retail crime, such as Shopwatch, but that responsibility should not be solely with the communities or retail workers themselves.

The responsibility is on the Government to introduce legislation for greater legal protection for retail workers, and to give our local police forces the support that they so desperately need to respond to, and prevent, incidents of retail crime, and to reverse the appalling record on it. Today’s debate shows much cross-party support for a solution. The Government can and must do more. Hopefully we will hear some positive news from the Minister about what he plans to do to address this important issue.

10.27 am

Ruth George (High Peak) (Lab): I pay tribute to my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) for introducing this important debate. Even on the last day of this Parliament, it is important that both sides of the House look at the position of shop workers in the run-up to Christmas, because crime and violence against them has got worse.

I pay tribute to USDAW, having worked on its Freedom from Fear campaign for many years, and having been instrumental in setting that up. USDAW surveyed its members recently, and found that 80% believed that crime and violence against them are getting worse. It was bad 20 years ago and, as Members across the House have described, we are now seeing more incidents of violence and threatening behaviour with weapons. That is not good enough for shop workers, who provide a valuable service—whether on our high streets, which desperately need our support, or in community shops on the edges of towns or in villages.

I am chair of the all-party parliamentary small shops group. We hear from people across the country about the vulnerable position those staff and business owners can be in, and I pay tribute to them. As our retail shops decline, and sole shops decline as well, we see a decline in our communities. High streets are important for bringing us together. Small shops are often the only place that people in those communities get to speak to someone. A shop owner told us at one of our recent events that an old lady said to him that the only time she touched another human being was when she gave her her change. Those stores are so important to their communities and to people across the country, so it is particularly important that we see them not just as profit-making businesses, but as providing a service. Most of the shopkeepers in my constituency say that they do not do it for the money, but because they love their community, and the community values them as well.

Those shopkeepers are on the frontline. More and more prolific offenders are targeting small, isolated shops, and more and more of the shopkeepers in my constituency are having to take on and tackle offenders themselves, which is a position that nobody should be in. Both through my work with USDAW and locally, I have met shopkeepers and shop workers who have been traumatised for life by the experiences they have had to go through. My hon. Friend the Member for Birmingham, Erdington (Jack Dromey) described the case of Barry, who I know; when he spoke with my hon. Friend at the USDAW conference, it was an incredibly moving experience.

The trouble is that our justice system is letting these people down. It is not just that police numbers are decreasing and that the response to incidents is not improving: by the time that I left the union, Barry, who I have known for many years, had still not seen the perpetrators in his case brought to justice. The court case was delayed again and again, and he was left knowing that those perpetrators were out there committing more offences, and feeling that he was in danger as a witness.

In my community, we have seen the amount that police can do to tackle prolific offenders reduced. Our local magistrates’ court in Buxton closed in 2015, and the local police cells have now been closed because there is not so much need for them now that we do not have a magistrates’ court. That makes it far harder for those police who are still there to deal with offenders. The number of community orders has decreased by a third; prolific offenders travel across county lines, knowing how to evade different police forces and evade justice, and our police have had to invest enormous amounts of resources in trying to bring those perpetrators to justice.

As we know, 20,000 police officers have been lost, but I ask the Minister what his party proposes to do about the staff who are so often crucial to bringing successful prosecutions. In Derbyshire, not only have we lost just over 300 police officers, but over 400 support staff. Those police community support officers, investigating officers and detectives are often the ones who do the work to ensure that criminals are not only caught, but successfully prosecuted. Without those support staff, that work is very difficult and ties the hands of police officers. I pay tribute to the Derbyshire police and crime commissioner; this year, through additional council tax, we had the funding to hire another 120 officers and staff. We got 58 additional police officers from that, but also 62 support staff including PCSOs, investigating officers and detectives. That is making a real difference to the ability of my local police force to bring perpetrators to justice, which we must never forget is an extremely important part of policing.

This issue is not just about political headlines or the number of police officers, but about the experience of communities. It is about people feeling that they are on the frontline and are not getting the response from Government, the police or society that they need to protect them and to keep those valuable community stores running.

In the run-up to Christmas, all Members will want to pay tribute to shop workers. Those people can expect an extremely busy time, but also, unfortunately, an increase
in abuse by people who are stressed, and an increase in violence and in thefts by criminals who seek to take advantage of this time of year, with the extra stock and extra money in the stores. I hope that in spite of the election, we can send a message to our communities and to police forces and shop workers everywhere that we are going to act.

10.34 am

Carolyn Harris (Swansea East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. I too declare an interest, in that I am a member of USDAW, the Co-op and the GMB. I congratulate my right hon. Friend the Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on all the work he has done on this issue and on having secured today's debate, which is probably the last opportunity we will have this year to debate this important subject, ahead of Christmas—when the problem will be at its worst—and, indeed, ahead of the general election. I feel that in the past four years, I have been a parliamentary candidate more often than I have been to the dentist.

Many other right hon. and hon. Members have shared stories of some of the truly terrifying situations that shop workers are put in as a result of retail crime. It is a cruel injustice that so many people across the UK go to work in absolute fear of being physically or verbally attacked just for doing their job. I pay tribute to USDAW for its Freedom from Fear campaign, which for many years has been raising awareness of this issue, both in this House and in all of our constituencies. Most of us have had the obligatory Freedom from Fear photo taken before Christmas; in my case, it is always taken in Morrisons. USDAW recently reported that 62% of shop workers have been the victim of verbal or physical abuse: that is shocking, and needs to be addressed as a matter of urgency. The UK Government must step up to provide the resources to give retail workers the protection they deserve.

A step in the right direction would be for the Home Office to publish its response to its call for evidence on violence towards shop staff, which took place earlier this year. The consultation closed in June, and received over 800 responses from individual shop workers, small shopkeepers, unions and businesses, detailing their experiences of the growing problem of violent crime. We were originally promised a response by this month, but there has been nothing so far. In light of the current political situation, I hope that some clarity will be provided before this Parliament comes to an end. I am clearly not alone in seeking that clarification, as the Association of Convenience Stores has written to the Minister calling for an urgent response. With an estimated 200,000 assaults or threats to retail and wholesale sector staff in the period since that call for evidence closed, the home Office must stop delaying, show some leadership, and commit to introducing tougher penalties for the perpetrators of those crimes.

Retail crime has multiple victims, from the retailers who suffer the losses to the staff who face abuse that makes them fearful of turning up for work. Every MP has this issue in their constituency; in Swansea East, retailers have lost nearly £200,000 through shoplifting just this year. However, although we are all well aware of the effects of retail crime on individuals and businesses, we need to start paying more attention to its causes. All of us have been sat in a pub and witnessed someone come in with a bottle of perfume, a DVD, a joint of meat or a slab of cheese, which are quite clearly stolen goods. All too often, those people are simply desperate to make a few pounds to feed an addiction, whether to alcohol, drugs or gambling. If we seriously want to see a reduction in retail crime, we need to do something about its catalysts. Addiction services are desperately underfunded, and the Government need to rectify that by providing sustainable resources for rehabilitation programmes and diversionary activities that will support those facing addiction and therefore protect our wider community.

Many retailers have raised concerns that the scale of the problem has escalated since the coalition Government introduced a £200 threshold for low-level shoplifting back in 2015, effectively decriminalising it. With police resources stretched to their limits, it is understandable that that is happening, but that does not make it right. Simply, we need more police officers on our streets. The Government have proudly announced their plan to recruit 20,000 more officers, which I am sure we would all be delighted about, if they had not spent the last nine years inflicting a series of cuts. That effectively means that their plans to get police numbers up would only replace what they have taken out since they took office.

People need to feel safe. Police patrolling the streets in our neighbourhoods would make a substantial difference. The Welsh Labour Government have funded an extra 500 police community support officers across the country, who have helped to reduce the impact of retail crime. It would be welcome if the UK Government were to replicate that.

I hope that the Minister has truly listened to the contributions of hon. Members and that he understands that violence against shop workers is a growing problem that needs to be urgently addressed. Nobody should fear going to work, but that is the reality for many retail staff. We need a commitment from the Government about their plans to tackle the issue. Frontline retail staff in our communities deserve more than empty gestures and broken promises. We need change—they need change—and we need it now.

10.41 am

The Minister for Crime, Policing and the Fire Service (Kit Malthouse): It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts, albeit in a different forum from the last one we met in. I congratulate the right hon. Member for Delyn (David Hanson) on securing the debate about a matter that he has worked on for some time. He worked closely with my predecessor, my hon. Friend the Member for Louth and Horncastle (Victoria Atkins), now the Minister for Safeguarding and Vulnerability, who took the matter seriously. I listened carefully to the contributions of all hon. Members and I will try to address some specific points that were raised.

As I hope hon. Members realise, the Government recognise the significant impact that retail crime has not only on businesses and those who work for them but on shoppers, consumers and the wider community, as we have heard from several hon. Members. That is why we co-chair the national retail crime steering group to bring together the Government, trade organisations and enforcement partners to ensure that the response to crimes affecting the retail sector is as robust as possible.
We have seen the benefits that that group can achieve in its recent response to the issue of violence and abuse towards shop workers, which was overseen by my hon. Friend the Minister for Safeguarding and Vulnerability, but we know there is more to do.

The right hon. Member for Delyn raised the issue of violence and abuse toward shop staff. I pay tribute to his work on raising awareness of the issue. I am aware of his discussions with Home Office Ministers on the topic during the passage of the Offensive Weapons Act 2019 in the last parliamentary Session, to which he referred. Violence and abuse remains the biggest concern for retailers and we are determined to tackle it.

Every day, we ask shop workers to deal with whatever comes through their door, whether that involves enforcing an age restriction on certain products or confronting shoplifters. Like anyone else, shop workers have the right to feel safe at work without fear of violence or intimidation. That is why, on 5 April, we launched a call for evidence to inform our response—I thank the right hon. Gentleman for his submission. We sought information on four key areas: prevalence and data, prevention and support, enforcement and the criminal justice system, and best practice.

As was mentioned, the call for evidence closed recently. We received more than 800 responses, including many first-hand accounts from shop staff. Although Home Office officials have completed an initial analysis, we have not yet published our response. That will disappoint hon. Members who referred to it, but we want to ensure that the detailed responses received are subject to a thorough and accurate analysis. Given that Parliament is about to be dissolved, I will take the opportunity to share our initial findings with hon. Members and to reassure them that we are engaging with key organisations to consider the next steps.

An initial analysis of the responses shows a widespread belief that violence and abuse towards shop staff has increased in recent years. The most common reason given was in the context of challenging individuals committing shop theft. Many respondents felt that a lack of a suitable response from the police resulted in offenders not fearing repercussions. Many felt unsupported by their organisation’s policies and management when dealing with verbally abusive customers. A significant number of respondents stated that they felt that incidents were becoming more violent and that they had experienced threats from individuals with knives, needles or other sharp objects.

That is obviously unacceptable. Nobody should be subjected to such violent attacks, especially in the workplace, and I reassure hon. Members that we are keen to take action in those areas, and in some cases, we already are.

David Hanson: Before the Minister moves on, is it his gut instinct that, if he were returned, as opposed to my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris), he would legislate for a stronger legislative solution to the offence?

Kit Malthouse: I will come on to that. I am not wholly convinced that we are without the tools that we need to deal with the issue, but we might need to address whether we are using them correctly.

On serious violence, we published the serious violence strategy, which has a particular focus on early intervention, in April 2018, so there has been action in that area. We allocated £22 million to the early intervention youth endowment fund and, in the long term, £200 million to the youth endowment fund to ensure that those most at risk are given the opportunity to turn away from violence and to lead more positive lives. We launched a public consultation on a new multi-agency public health approach to tackling serious violence, following which we announced that we would introduce a new legal duty on statutory agencies to plan and collaborate to prevent and reduce serious violence. We gave the police extra powers to tackle knife crime through the Offensive Weapons Act, including new knife crime prevention orders.

Those wider measures will help, but we recognise the importance of focusing our efforts on measures that are specifically targeted on tackling retail crime. This year, the Home Office provided £60,000 for a targeted communication campaign, led by the Association of Convenience Stores, to raise awareness of the existing legislation to protect shop workers. We published guidance on gov.uk about the use of the impact statement for business, which provides victims with the opportunity to tell the courts about the impact that a crime has had on their businesses. We also worked with the police to develop guidance for staff and retailers to use when reporting emergency and violent incidents.

The right hon. Member for Delyn and other hon. Members have asked the Government to consider introducing a new offence of attacks on shop staff, or to increase the severity of existing offences. I hope that he is aware from previous discussions that powers are already available to the police and the Crown Prosecution Service to deal with that type of offending and to provide protection to retail staff.

There are a number of assault offences and corresponding differences in maximum penalties. At the higher end of the scale, causing grievous bodily harm with intent and wounding with intent carry maximum penalties of life imprisonment. The sentencing guidelines on assault include an aggravating factor of “offences committed against those working in the public sector or providing a service to the public”, which should be taken into account by the courts when deciding what sentence to impose and may be applied to retail staff conducting their duties. In addition, the Sentencing Council is reviewing its guidelines on assault. A consultation on the revised guidelines is anticipated in 2020. I advise hon. Members to respond to that consultation with a specific focus on assaults on retail workers.

Let me turn to some of the specific points raised. Several hon. Members called for me to publish the review of the call for evidence as quickly as possible. The fact that we are going into an election means that quite difficult, but I give my undertaking that, as soon as we come back, if I am in the job, we will try to get it out as quickly as possible. Obviously, the five-week election campaign gives officials a bit of an easier time, so they can digest the responses and get it out as soon as they can.

The hon. Member for Streatham and Urnston (Kate Green) raised the issue of facial recognition technology. Obviously, we are supporting the police as they trial the
use of new technology across the country. It has become clear that facial recognition technology has significant crime-fighting possibilities. A recent court case established that there is a sufficient legal framework for its use and operation in this country, but as its use is expanded, possibly by police forces, in the months and years to come, I have no doubt that it will have to come to the House for some sort of democratic examination at some point. Thus far, however, where it is being deployed, we are seeing significant benefits from it.

**Kate Green:** I am pleased that the Minister believes that there will need to be a full debate about facial recognition technology in the House. He will be aware of concerns about personal privacy and the possibility that it is, in some respects, discriminatory against certain groups. If he and his party are returned to government, will he commit to ensuring that the House has an opportunity to have that full debate?

**Kit Malthouse:** There has already been a debate in the House on the use of facial recognition technology, and it is obviously within the purview of Members and Select Committees and others to examine the issue. It has just been through the courts—South Wales Police has been challenged on its use of facial recognition technology, and the courts found the current framework satisfactory. I have no doubt that when we get back from this election there will be an urge for the issue to be debated in the House, given the enormous success that is being seen with facial recognition technology.

The right hon. Member for Delyn raised the issue of local police plans, suggesting that we put pressure on police and crime commissioners to include retail crime in their plans. If this was a pressing issue in the high street, one would hope that the police and crime commissioner would commit to having it in their plan anyway. However, we have created a new National Policing Board, which is looking at systemic issues across the country that should be addressed by the whole policing family in a concerted effort, and one area we are looking at is neighbourhood crime. What we put into that basket has yet to be fully agreed, and I will certainly consider putting retail crime in there.

I am very alive to the connection between drugs and alcohol misuse and the impact on shops and retail crime. First, on alcohol, I hope Members will have noticed that we are planning to roll out alcohol abstinence monitoring orders across the whole country. From memory, we have been given about £22 million to do that. The orders have been very successfully used in Croydon and in a pilot in Yorkshire, Lincolnshire and Humberside recently. They are for low-level offending and those convicted of a crime where alcohol was the compelling factor in its commission. Compliance rates with that disposal are up at 93% or 94%, and there is enormous potential there.

With drugs, we have been given some money to start to combat the awful scourge of county lines, which is causing mayhem in many small towns across the country, not least in my constituency. I hope that when we return after the election we will see even more assertive action on that.

There is more that we can do on treatment and rehabilitation for those who fall into drug addiction. We must look imaginatively at schemes around the world that can be used to divert from offending those who have been convicted of a drug offence and are out in the community on probation. I point Members to a very interesting programme in Hawaii called the HOPE programme—Hawaii’s opportunity probation with enforcement—which I would be very keen to try to establish in this country as a way to deal with people who are low-level offenders because of a drug addiction. That could be managed in a much better way than I think we are managing it at the moment.

A number of Members mentioned the £200 threshold. I hope they are aware that police can still prosecute somebody who steals something worth less than £200.

**Martin Vickers** (Cleethorpes) (Con): I met Chief Constable Lee Freeman of Humberside Police and raised the £200 threshold. As other Members have pointed out, it causes great concern, particularly to small shopkeepers. He pointed out that the police are flexible in how they interpret the guidance in Humberside. Will the Minister make sure that other forces up and down the country treat the matter in a much more serious way? It is very serious for small shopkeepers. The flexibility that Humberside is showing should be replicated elsewhere.

**Kit Malthouse:** That is exactly right. If a chief constable decrees that it is a problem in their area, it is perfectly possible for them to have a policy of prosecuting thefts of a value under £200. I am certainly willing to make sure that chiefs across the country are aware of that.

Given the depth of concern expressed this morning, if I am returned to this job after the election, I am happy to look at the data and see what it tells us about the operation of that policy, now that we are four or five years in. I do not think there is any problem with us reviewing that data internally and deciding whether the policy is working, and then promulgating some kind of best practice.

A number of challenges were made on the recruitment of 20,000 police officers. The right hon. Member for Delyn asked me when they would be recruited—recruitment has already started. A number of police forces are recruiting, not least because we have 3,000 police officers to recruit from last year’s budget settlement. With the allocations to all forces, we have already signalled what the recruitment targets should be over the next 15 months or so.

We expect the first 6,000 of the 20,000 to be recruited by the end of the financial year next year, 8,000 in the year after and the final 6,000 in the year after that. It will not be a straight progression, not least because police officers tend to retire at unpredictable times. When we add in retirees, we have to recruit somewhere between 45,000 and 50,000 police officers over the next three years, which will be a huge job. Nevertheless, we have been given £45 million in-year this year to start, and I hope we will be announcing the allocations of that money relatively soon.

Some forces are going for this in a big way straightforward. I know the Met police is recruiting between 300 and 400 police officers a month at the moment, which is all good news. However, I would just counter the direct connection that a number of Members make between levels of crime and numbers of police officers, because the connection is not just about inputs; it is also about what we are doing. I remind Members that, notwithstanding
the fact that we have fewer police officers today, overall crime is 35% lower than it was 10 years ago. For example, police officer numbers were much higher in the ‘80s and ‘90s than in the ‘50s and ‘60s, yet crime was much higher too. Focus and priority is as important as the number of police officers.

Dr Drew: One of the problems in the retail sector now is that some shopkeepers are just giving up reporting the crime. The Government have to grasp the issue of serious under-reporting.

Kit Malthouse: I always say the same thing when people tell me about under-reporting, which is that we must urge everybody to report every possible crime, because modern policing is all about data. The police respond to numbers. If they see numbers, feel the numbers and see the pattern of behaviour, they will respond. It is a bit like that old philosophical aphorism: if a tree falls in a forest and no one is there to hear it, did it actually happen? If a crime is committed, particularly in a large rural constituency such as mine, and it is not reported, as far as the police know, it never happened. Data is absolutely key. I urge all shop owners to report every crime.

The right hon. Member for Delyn raised the impact of serious and organised crime. He is quite right that high-profile thefts by serious and organised crime need to be addressed, not least the demolition and stealing of cash machines, which we see in quite a lot of rural constituencies, including my own. As I hope the right hon. Gentleman knows, we are undertaking a serious and organised crime review over the next few weeks, which I hope will give us some strategy and point us to the future.

I am grateful to hon. Members for what has been an important debate. I hope that I have outlined some of the work that the Government have done, and will hopefully do more of in future, to make sure that everybody—shop workers and shoppers alike—will have fun and will exchange money for presents and gifts in the run-up to Christmas, safely and happily, now and in the years to come.

Mr Clive Betts (in the Chair): I thank all Members for their co-operation in keeping to the time guidance. I call David Hanson to wind up.

10.57 am

David Hanson: I am grateful to you, Mr Betts, for chairing this session, and to the Minister and my hon. Friend the Member for Swansea East (Carolyn Harris) for their responses. I will take one point from what the Minister said: if he is returned, he has agreed to review the £200 threshold on shop theft, which I know my hon. Friend will do, should she be returned to office.

This issue is extremely important and will not go away. It is about ensuring that staff who uphold our laws are protected by our laws; it is about ensuring that they live free from fear. I suspect that every retailer in the country in response to the consultation will have said that they want a separate offence and for assaulting a staff worker to be an aggravated offence. I hope that whoever forms the Government after this election will look at the consultation responses and bring forward measures. It is within our grasp now. The people who work in shops, the people who manage, run and own shops, and consumers have the same objective—to allow shop workers to be free from fear and to go about their business supported by the state, upholding the laws of the land; to ensure that members of the public who attack them face an aggravated offence; and to ensure a greater police presence on the streets if needs be, more neighbourhood policing and strong interventions to tackle some of the problems that drive people to undertake those shoplifting and attack offences in the first place.

This is an important issue. I am grateful that so many hon. Members have turned up on the last Tuesday of Parliament to put down a marker to whoever forms the next Government that this issue will not go away and will be dealt with by Parliament.

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered prevention of retail crime.
Princess Royal Hospital, Telford

11 am

Lucy Allan (Telford) (Con): I beg to move,

That this House has considered Princess Royal Hospital, Telford.

It is a great pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Betts. Last week the Leader of the House, my right hon. Friend the Member for North East Somerset (Mr Rees-Mogg), said:

“Our main purpose as Members of Parliament is to seek redress of grievance for our constituents”.—[Official Report, 31 October 2019; Vol. 667, c. 509.]

That is what I seek to do today, on the last day of this Parliament and on what might be my last opportunity to speak for Telford. It is a great privilege to have the opportunity to do so.

For the past six years, Telford’s No. 1 concern has been the future of the Princess Royal Hospital. Throughout those years, I have been working with my community to get their concerns heard by the hospital management and in many debates and speeches in this place. Today is different, because in the past few weeks the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care endorsed a decision by hospital management to proceed with a plan that will mean Telford loses vital hospital services and that, simultaneously, will lead to huge investment in Royal Shrewsbury Hospital in the county town of Shrewsbury, some 30 minutes away from Telford. In this debate, I want to put on the record why my constituents feel a sense of loss and a sense of anger.

Telford is not a place that has a sense of entitlement. It is not a place that makes demands or shouts over the voices of others. It is a stoical place and has often had to overcome the odds, face adversity and keep on going. It is a former mining town and is now a rapidly growing new town, lying 20 minutes equidistant between Black Country Wolverhampton and the leafy county town of Shrewsbury. Telford is remote and isolated, because it has poor transport connections and low car ownership. It troubles me that, despite the poorer health outcomes, child poverty and health inequalities that I as the MP see, the hospital management has brought forward a plan for our health that allocates NHS resource not in the clinical outcome perspective. Shrewsbury is 30 minutes away. This proposal makes any sense, not in a business sense nor from a point for us. I understand how health economics works—none of my constituents as he listened to me and to the arguments about why the plan is flawed.

For six years, the management has toyed with a plan to centralise services 30 minutes away. It has been dressed up as local decision making by local clinicians, but in reality, it was decided by executives from across the country—smart suits and smart cars—with no connection to our area and no concern for our communities. Indeed, the original architect of the plan held many hospital management chief executive officer posts, from Chester and Sherwood Forest to London, and he was last reported to be earning £40,000 per month, having resigned from a previous post for a single day in order to pick up a tax-free retirement package of £252,000 and then resumed the same job the next day. Such are the people behind this plan.

Actual local clinicians opposed the plan, as did all the councillors and local MPs. Protests were held and petitions made, but the decision makers did not want to know what local people had to say. Throughout that time, there was one hope—that once the bureaucrats got to the end of their decision-making process, the Secretary of State for Health and Social Care would call for an independent review to consider all the issues. I thank the former Secretary of State, my right hon. Friend the Member for South West Surrey (Mr Hunt), for this courtesy, consideration and kindness to me and my constituents as he listened to me and to the arguments about why the plan is flawed.

The hospital bureaucrats, whose decision this was, did not have to think about how people feel when they are told they do not need their A&E. It is not part of their role to understand our communities, our history, our geography, our identity, our emotional connectedness to our hospital, our affection for it and our pride in it. After all, they are not accountable to us; it is just one more job before the next one.

We, the representatives of the people, should care about our communities. We should care about how they feel, and about their sense of what is just. It is our job to be on the side of the people—not on the side of those who are well connected and have power and influence, who can speak to the decision makers behind closed doors, but on the side of the stoical, decent people of Telford, who play by the rules and have a right to be treated as fairly and justly as anyone else.

I will quote a constituent who has worked locally in the NHS for 15 years. He says:

“In Telford we are a group of hardworking communities with ambitions for our children’s future. When the brand new women and children’s unit was opened I was ecstatic. It was a turning point for us. I understand how health economics works—none of this proposal makes any sense, not in a business sense nor from a clinical outcome perspective. Shrewsbury is 30 minutes away. That’s too long for stroke, too long for a heart attack and too long for our children. This is a plan that bears all the hallmarks of cronism at its rampant best. How else can it be explained? The NHS has no colours or banners”—he is right about that—“it supports all of us all of the time. It is something worth fighting for, for our children’s sake.”

On the point about children, I want to give voice to another one of my constituents. She wrote to me and said:

“My name is Sarah. I live in Telford. I am a mother to Alfie, who is 5 years old. Alfie has Down’s syndrome. In April 2018, at night, our son began to haemorrhage and he was taken to Telford A&E. Whilst there Alfie started to have a massive haemorrhage (blood was pouring from his mouth and nose) and you could not
even see his face or his beautiful blond hair). I was immediately told to run with him to Jesus. There was so much blood. He was rushed in for an emergency operation to cauterise the bleed. Then our world then truly fell apart. He failed to breathe in air, post surgery. It took the theatre staff three hours to get him stable. The point of telling you this is quite simple. If A&E at PRH had been closed, Alfie would have had his 2nd and massive haemorrhage whilst still being transported to wherever they deemed to take us. I have chills just thinking of what the outcome would have been for our beautiful son. Put simply, having A&E open 24/7 saved Alfie’s life.”

I know the Secretary of State has tried his best to save our A&E from the hospital management’s plan. Indeed, he announced on the Conservative MPs’ WhatsApp group last week:

“Lucy, we’ve saved the A&E at Telford. We have just put a further £5 million into Telford’s hospital just last week.”

That would clearly be fantastic news. If it were indeed the case, I would not be standing here today; I would be writing an election leaflet proclaiming the good news to my constituents. Let us not be flippan and casual about something that is so important. My constituents want to know what an A&E local is and, importantly, whether the hospital management will agree to support it. When I asked the Minister’s parliamentary aide, my hon. Friend the Member for Chichester (Gillian Keegan), whether she could find out more about A&E local, she asked her assistant to respond to me. They said that my inquiry would be passed on to the Department for a response, which, in the light of the impending dissolution of Parliament, would not come until after Christmas at the earliest, in 2020.

It was the Minister’s decision to rush out an announcement in support of the management’s plan. He chose to do so without having worked out what would happen in Telford. Having made that announcement of his own volition, it is not good enough to say, “You’ll just have to wait to find out more.” How do I explain that to my constituents? If the funding for a new 20-bed ward for winter pressures has increased from £4 million to £5 million, that is fantastic, but I want to know and be able to tell my constituents about that. Simply mentioning it in a WhatsApp group is not enough; something has gone wrong with the communication.

My mission as an MP is to stand up for my constituents and take up their needs and concerns, so I know that the Minister will fully understand why I am so aggrieved that my constituents have been treated this way. Their treatment has been shabby and disrespectful. We are talking about the issue that matters most to my constituents, which is why I have helped them to crowdfund the money and seek counsel’s opinion on whether to pursue judicial review. We have nearly hit our target—thank you Telford—but it should not have come to this. A little more respect for the people of Telford would have avoided this situation.

During this lengthy saga, a former hospitals Minister—not my right hon. Friend the Member for Ludlow (Mr Dunne), who is here today—said to me, “They can’t all expect to have an A&E at the end of their road you know, Lucy.” My constituents have never asked for that and nor would they. They ask only to be treated as equal to anyone else in their value, worth and dignity, and that is what they deserve.
The Secretary of State also asked NHS England to come forward with proposals within a month on how to keep the A&E in Telford open as an A&E local, to ensure that the Princess Royal Hospital can continue to deliver the urgent and emergency care that the residents of my hon. Friend’s constituency need and value so much. That request drew on the advice provided by the IRP. Plans for A&E locals are being developed by NHS England and NHS Improvement, and the Department has been in close contact about those developments.

NHS England has now published the proposal, following the Secretary of State’s request. He and I are delighted with the development. The Shrewsbury and Telford trust has put forward a model that will enable an enhanced service that is distinct from an urgent treatment centre. The model will increase the volume of activity that can safely be delivered through the proposed urgent treatment centre on the planned care site at PRH.

I understand that the Secretary of State and NHS England have today written to my hon. Friend. Friend the Member for Telford. If I may, I will touch on what that letter says. She may well wish to come back on it, once I have let her know what it states. The Secretary of State has been clear: the A&E at the Princess Royal Hospital, Telford, will remain open as an A&E local.

Lucy Allan: In my constituency, there is concern as to what “A&E local” means. I am aware that there is 24/7 walk-in, which is fantastic, although most of my constituents do not know that, but will “A&E local” be defined in more detail? I have not yet received the letter, so will the Minister enlighten me and my constituents?

Edward Argar: I am happy to do so. I hope that what I say will be helpful to my hon. Friend, but I am always happy to have a further conversation, if she so wishes after this debate. If she and I are both successfully returned to this place and doing the same things, I would be delighted to meet her.

The trust and local commissioners will further develop a framework of options for outside core hours. The trust has proposed a model that will increase the volume of activity that can safely be delivered through the proposed UTC on the planned care site. It proposes an emergency medicine consultant presence throughout core hours, a consultant-led ambulatory emergency care service for specific pathways, and additional diagnostic presence. That model means that the PRH will continue to provide A&E services. We are satisfied that that meets the proposed A&E local model.

My hon. Friend will wish to consider that further, and she may wish to have a further conversation with me, but I believe that the proposal is testament to the strong voice that Telford has because she listens to her constituents. It is a victory for my hon. Friend in speaking up for her constituents.

Lucy Allan: I am very grateful indeed to hear the Minister’s comments and, in particular, to see some movement—a shift indicating that we are being listened to and that Telford is not being ignored. I am grateful for that development and progress. As the Minister will understand, I may well continue to push for further progress, but it is a step in the right direction and I am grateful for it.
Edward Argar: I am grateful. It would be a brave Minister who ignored either Telford or my hon. Friend, and I am not sure that I am quite that brave.

I believe that this is welcome news, although I know that my hon. Friend will want to consider and digest it. It also comes on top of the extra £4 million in winter capital funding going to the PRH—again, she argued for that and helped to secure it—which the Secretary of State announced last week, to reduce pressure on the A&E and to prepare for winter.

Lucy Allan: Will the Minister confirm that that winter capital funding is for this winter and an extra 20-bed ward?

Edward Argar: I confirm that that is capital funding for her hospital to prepare for this winter and to meet the challenges it faces.

The detail of the proposal has still to be worked up, and NHS England will work with the trust, its partners and the Royal College of Emergency Medicine to support the development of the model and a timeline for its implementation. I hope my hon. Friend wishes to be involved in that process, and that both of us will be back here to have that conversation later in the year.

Jeremy Lefroy (Stafford) (Con): I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Telford (Lucy Allan) on securing this important debate. A number of constituents from the west side of my constituency rely absolutely on the Princess Royal Hospital in Telford. Will the model mentioned by the Minister include, as it does in Stafford, the reception of blue-light services—that is, 999 ambulances—in the medical sphere at least? It is important to understand that, because the ability to receive blue-light services is what distinguishes an A&E from an urgent care centre.

Edward Argar: May I crave your indulgence, Mr Betts? My hon. Friend the Member for Stafford (Jeremy Lefroy) is retiring from Parliament at this election, so it would be wrong of me not to take the opportunity to pay tribute to him. He has been an extraordinary advocate for Stafford and, more than that, an asset to this Parliament and previous ones. He is a thoroughly decent and honourable man, and Parliament will be a poorer place without him sitting in it. [Hon. Members: “Hear, hear!”]

In respect of the point that my hon. Friend made, my understanding—I will clarify this subsequently, if necessary—is that the model will be underpinned by comprehensive pathways and protocols agreed with the ambulance services for blue-light transfer when the consultant cover is available, or diversion when not. There is, however, direct engagement with the ambulance trust. As I have said, hon. Members will need time and further discussion to consider the proposal, but I think and hope that they will agree with me that it is a useful first step to making progress.

To conclude, this is positive news for Telford, and that is down to my hon. Friend the Member for Telford, who is a strong and determined local champion for her constituents and for the town of Telford. They are incredibly lucky to have her as their representative and their voice in Parliament. I am confident that that voice will be speaking up for them in this House for many years to come. If they want a strong local voice in this House and for their hospital and NHS, every vote that they cast for my hon. Friend in the forthcoming election will deliver exactly that.

Question put and agreed to.

11.26 am

Sitting suspended.
School Uniform Costs

[Mark Pritchard in the Chair]

2.30 pm

Emma Hardy (Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle) (Lab): I beg to move,

That this House has considered school uniform costs.

It is a pleasure to take part in this debate, although it feels a little like we are in the graveyard shift at the end of a very long Parliament. As I said to the Minister just before the debate, it is a genuine pleasure to talk to him about education once more. I started this parliamentary Session talking about education, so to finish it this way feels complete. I want to focus on the cost of school uniforms, and I will make recommendations that I hope schools and the Minister will follow.

After nine years of cuts, benefit cuts and stagnating wages, an increasing number of parents are unable to meet the basic cost of living, and the knock-on effect of that reality is a rise in child poverty. Currently, 8.3 million working-age adults and 4.6 million children are living in poverty. The numbers continue to rise, and forecasts predict that they are set to exceed the record levels of the early 1990s, which should concern us all deeply.

Recent research has brought to light many of the negative effects that growing up in poverty has on children. Some are stark and brutal. In the most deprived areas of our country, girls can expect to live 20 fewer years of their lives in good health, compared with those in the least-deprived areas. For boys, it is 19 fewer years. Both genders are four times more likely to develop mental health problems by the age of 11.

The indignities and suffering brought about by poverty are often less obvious. Every September, we see children on their way to start the new school year looking very smart in their uniforms, and our thoughts might turn to our own, or perhaps our children’s, first day. I was a teacher, and I remember the pleasure of having my classroom windows overlook the children starting school and lining up with their brand-new book bags, which were nearly as big as them, as they stood outside, waiting to meet their new teacher.

I now see children in uniforms through a different set of eyes. I was deeply affected by the testimony of a group of mothers at an evidence session of the Select Committee on Education. They told us of the demands placed on them by the increasing cost of school uniforms. Uniform dress codes now rarely consist of a simple branded sweatshirt and dark trousers or a skirt; they now include shirts, ties, blazers, and PE kits, indoor and out, all branded and often available through only a single supplier. I was devastated by the parents’ description of skipping meals to try to meet the ever-increasing costs.

Tragically, those accounts do not represent rare and isolated circumstances. Research from the Children’s Society shows that nearly one in six families said that school uniforms were to blame for their having to cut back on food and other basic essentials. Its report, “The Wrong Blazer 2018: Time for action on school uniform costs”, revealed that families have to find an average of £340 per year for each child at secondary school—an increase of 7% since 2015. Parents of primary school children spent an average of £255—an increase of 2%.

Parentkind’s latest annual survey of parents confirms that upward pressure: 76% of parents reported that the cost of sending children to school is increasing, and more than half are worried about meeting that cost. The high cost of uniforms is in some cases maintained by school policies that insist that parents buy clothing from specialist shops, rather than giving them the choice of buying items at cheaper stores, such as supermarkets or high street chains. When parents had to buy two or more school uniform items from a specific supplier, spending was found to be an average of £71 per year higher for secondary school children and £77 higher per year for primary school children. Some schools demand that seemingly generic items, such as a pair of black trousers, a PE top or shorts, must carry the school badge or logo, which also locks parents into specific retailers.

Rachael Maskell (York Central) (Lab/Co-op): My hon. Friend is making a very important speech. This matter was brought to my attention by my constituents when a school changed its uniform policy to have badged trousers, skirts, blazers and other items of clothing. Does she agree that schools can take matters into their own hands not only by having generic main items of clothing, but by using uniform exchanges, which not only help families that cannot afford school uniforms, but are good for the environment?

Emma Hardy: I completely agree. I will go on to talk about uniform exchanges and the impact on the environment. The House of Commons did some social media outreach in advance of this debate. Someone from Birmingham said: “My niece is from a disadvantaged school background and had to completely replace her school uniform within six months of starting a new secondary school.” Someone else wrote: “My dad needs to buy me a PE kit, which is around £80 for everything I need. I can’t do PE, and get detention every time I go to PE. I feel embarrassed going to PE knowing everyone will make fun of me not being able to afford the extreme costs.” There are many other examples.

Sir Paul Beresford (Mole Valley) (Con): I am interested in what the hon. Lady is saying, because I have also had people contact me. One lady said that supermarkets are an ideal place to go because she can get matching clothes. I was surprised to find that Tesco used to embroider badges on at parents’ request. It does not do it now, but the supplier will do it. Parents pay £4 for a pair of trousers, instead of something outrageous if it is from the key supplier. It is in the hands of the schools if they wish to do it.

Emma Hardy: I agree in part, but I want to put a bit of pressure on the Minister to try to force schools to ensure that uniforms are as cheap as possible, because there are alternatives out there.

This is not just about the increasing cost of uniforms; the fashionable zero-tolerance approach to behaviour is also having an impact on the education of children from hard-up families. More than one in 20 parents reported that their child had been sent home for wearing non-approved clothes or shoes, or even the wrong socks, as a result of struggling to afford the costs. That is something that came up in the evidence. Children are being sent home or are being put into isolation for the day because their uniform is not absolutely accurate. Based on Department for Education statistics on the
number of children in primary and secondary schools across England, that translates to about half a million children having suffered the indignity and humiliation of being sent home from school or put in isolation—punished for no reason other than the misfortune of having been born part of a family that is living in poverty.

The pernicious nature of poverty sours even what we might remember as the fun parts of school. It is known that children from disadvantaged backgrounds are likely to miss out on school extras, such as trips or music lessons, but evidence has emerged recently showing that the growing trend of schools increasing the number of dress-up days, often as a means of shoring up their depleted funds, is resulting in an increase in the number of unauthorised absences among those pupils.

An analysis of attendance data by the Association of School and College Leaders shows a significant increase in the number of unauthorised absences among pupils on 14 December. The date puzzled the researchers until they realised that the date was traditionally Christmas jumper day. Unauthorised absences among pupils regarded as disadvantaged in the schools studied were nearly three times higher than on a typical day. For those regarded as without disadvantage, it was still nearly twice as high. At the risk of sounding like the Grinch before Christmas, I encourage schools to change Christmas jumper day to something more straightforward, such as Christmas hat day. The school could provide all the materials for the children, who could still dress up and enjoy Christmas, but it would not put off children from poorer backgrounds from attending school that day and learning, just because they cannot afford the cost of a Christmas jumper.

The fact that the embarrassment of standing out drives pupils to skip school casts a different light on the Children’s Society’s findings: about one in 10 said that the unaffordability of uniforms had led to the child wearing unclean or ill-fitting uniforms to school. I received feedback from some teenage girls about that, and they talked about the humiliation they felt at having to go to school in ill-fitting uniforms. One parent told me that her daughter was sent home because her skirt was too tight and was seen as not correctly following the school uniform code. However, the girl had grown considerably after a sudden growth spurt, and the parent was unable to afford a new uniform, especially as the need for logos makes it more expensive.

Our children are growing up in an increasingly image-conscious world where bullying has become easier through social media. As I have said, children in poverty are four times more likely to have a mental health problem by the age of 11. It seems unlikely that there is no connection between children being forced to go to school in ill-fitting or unclean uniform and their feeling an impact on their mental health.

My response to hearing the harrowing testimony from mothers at the Education Committee hearing was to organise a uniform exchange in my constituency, called RE:Uniform, which began at the beginning of summer term and ran throughout the summer holidays. Thanks to a network of volunteers—in particular, I thank Reverend David Speirs and Susie Steel from the Methodist Church, the Hessle Road Network and many others—items of school uniform that were no longer needed but still perfectly wearable were collected at pick-up-and-drop-off points. They were washed, ironed, sorted and made available, for free, to anyone who needed them. It was a huge success—we helped more than 500 families and we intend to repeat it. That kind of scheme should be part of everyday life. Although some schools do similar schemes, one of the great things about the RE:Uniform project was that it mixed up uniform from across the city. Some areas may have a more expensive generic uniforms, and it might end up being distributed to another area of the city. That was its strength and the reason it worked so well.

Holly Lynch (Halifax) (Lab): I am grateful to my hon. Friend for securing this debate and for sharing that example with us. She is making a powerful speech. A Huffington Post journalist recently visited Moorside primary school in Halifax and published an article that reflected not only on cuts in schools but on how poverty at home had an impact on a child’s learning, through hunger in the classroom and school uniforms. The article included some incredibly powerful images of tiny children’s feet in pumps with holes in them and of holes in school uniform sleeves. Does my hon. Friend agree that while the Government do support a number of schemes to make sure that children are fed and can learn in the classroom, there is not a great deal of support for families to pay uniform costs?

Emma Hardy: I agree with my hon. Friend that the Government can do more. In fact, the Welsh Government are insisting on a limit on school uniform costs and on gender-neutral uniform. They are giving parents the power to hold schools to account if they are not acting in the parents’ interest, but unfortunately we do not have that option for schools in England. The scheme that we ran was very successful, but it could have been even more so had all schools been encouraged to take off the badges and have generic uniform, because if uniforms did not have badges, they could be shared more easily across the city.

Putting costs and poverty aside for a moment, we need to think about a sustainable future and consider the pressures on the environment and the challenges of climate change. Last Saturday I attended a fantastic event in Hull: an eco and affordable fashion show, where people had made incredibly inventive clothes out of discarded materials. I sat next to an amazing woman who called herself “the mean queen” and said she could live on hardly anything. She had knitted a bag out of the tape from a video cassette—it was absolutely amazing. I am not saying we all need to do that, but perhaps we need to think about sustainable fashion and reusing things.

There is no evidence that a school uniform, let alone a highly prescriptive and zealously enforced school uniform, improves educational outcomes for anyone—children disadvantaged or otherwise. A perception seems to have grown over time that, somehow, the stricter the uniform, the better behaved the child, but I have seen no evidence of any correlation. Having a uniform that all parents and children can access is more likely to build positive relationships with parents and the community, and, therefore, instil a better attitude to learning at school.

The Department for Education states that it “strongly encourages schools to have a uniform”,

[Emma Hardy]
and believes that
"uniform can play a valuable role in contributing to the ethos of a school and setting an appropriate tone".

The Department insists that schools should have a uniform, but I put it to the Minister that perhaps it needs to do more to ensure that it is affordable for everyone. Currently, the Department expects schools only to "take account" of its published guidance on school uniforms. The guidance states that a school's uniform policy should be clearly set out and subject to reasonable requests for variation, and that any changes should take into account the views of parents and pupils, but there is no mention of affordability. Specifically, it says:

"No school uniform should be so expensive as to leave pupils or their families feeling unable to apply to, or attend, a school of their choice, due to the cost of the uniform. School governing bodies should therefore give high priority to cost considerations. The governing body should be able to demonstrate how best value has been achieved and keep the cost of supplying the uniform under review."

I would like to think that neither my nor any other party would oppose that proposal, and that we can all unite in agreement. It could, therefore, be progressed extremely quickly, although I realise that time is getting a little tight. Instead, however, it has been put on the back shelf.

We need to poverty-proof the school day, beginning with a school uniform price cap. The Children's Society proposes taking a similar approach to that of the Financial Conduct Authority in its capping of rent-to-own products. It proposes the benchmarking of prices and an average cost of the items concerned. That would involve a school's regulatory body surveying the market to ascertain the cost of school uniform items and setting the cap based on that. Then, under statutory guidance, schools would be responsible not only for ensuring that they are making affordability a primary concern, but for demonstrating that their uniform policy is in keeping with the cap. In short, under the cap, would a family be able to afford the items of uniform set out in the school's policy?

Introducing such a measure would not be without challenge. It would require some extra administrative work for schools, to ensure that their uniform cost is within the cap. Crucially, it would require an honest and accurate assessment of the incomes of poor families and the other claims on their spending, to decide what is realistically affordable for them. Recently, many decision makers have struggled to accept the true scale and nature of poverty in this country.

The measure should alleviate the unnecessary costs facing all parents. However, for millions the root cause of the problem will remain—ever-increasing poverty in our country. In response, the Labour party is prepared to reinvest in this country, to make work pay and to properly support those who are out of work or disabled. It will create a unified national education service for England, to provide cradle-to-grave learning that is free at the point of use. Fully funded, it will begin the huge task of turning around the effects of years of cuts and neglect, and will incorporate all forms of education, from early years through to adult education. That will be built on the principles that underpin the Labour movement: a society should be judged on how it treats the weakest and most vulnerable, and should believe that every child—and adult—matters.

2.47 pm

John Howell (Henley) (Con): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, for what inevitably will be the last time in this Parliament. It is also a pleasure to participate in a Westminster Hall debate; I have spoken in a large number of them and I am a happy to finish this Parliament speaking in one. The third pleasure is to follow the speech by the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy).

Let me start with where we agree. I would like to hear from the Minister what the plans are for the guidance on school uniforms and whether it will be made statutory. For the reasons the hon. Lady set out, I fully accept the benefit of making that guidance statutory, as I think it will help. Where we tend to differ is in our attitude to school uniforms as a whole. I regard them as important and I have seen evidence, which I am happy to make available, that schools with a school uniform perform better and their children feel much more cohesive and part of something bigger. I would hate to lose that and, thinking back to my own time at school, the feeling of collectiveness that followed from it.

However, I agree that we need to help with the cost of school uniforms, which averages around £350. That is quite a lot, particularly for families at the bottom end of the pay scale. Interesting new methods have been developed to tackle that. I will come to one of them, but first I want to say thank you to my hon. Friend the Member for Mole Valley (Sir Paul Beresford) mentioned another: putting pressure on organisations to allow badges to be sewn on to standard clothing, which is much cheaper and is accessible to everyone.

In my experience, many schools—I have not done a calculation on this, so I will not say most—take this issue into account and have their own schemes to help disadvantaged families afford uniforms, where one is in existence. Such schemes are very helpful. However, one of the most interesting schemes I have come across uses the internet to make what are, in effect, second-hand clothes much more widely available. I see a lot of attraction in that. People might argue, “Well, it’s second-hand clothing,” but the person who founded the charity that established that scheme was clear when she said, “Well, heavens; a school uniform, whether it’s new or not, looks second hand within two weeks of being worn.” That is absolutely true, so I do not think the fact that the clothing is second hand should play a major part in preventing anyone from being able to engage in that sort of transaction, and it has a material impact on the cost of the items concerned.
This is an important issue to have raised at the end of this Parliament. As I said, it will be interesting to hear the Minister’s response about the statutory basis on which school clothing is to be founded.

2.52 pm

Stephanie Peacock (Barnsley East) (Lab): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard, and to follow the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell). I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on securing the debate, and on her tireless work to raise the profile of an issue that for too long has flown beneath the radar, despite having a real and significant impact on our constituents’ lives.

According to the Children’s Society, 1 million children in England live in families that get into debt just to meet the rising cost of school uniforms. One in six families blames school uniform costs for having to cut back on food and other essentials. One resident in my constituency told me she had forked out more than £120 for one child’s school uniform and PE kit. That is a staggering amount to pay, but the reasons why people have to do so are well known. Some schools require compulsory branded items, some request expensive specialist gear, and others use single suppliers and retailers—even getting a financial incentive to do so. As if that were not enough, for many struggling parents this is an annual occurrence, as their children quickly grow out of purchased uniforms, and many must pay to clothe several children.

This summer, in response to the concern among parents in my constituency, I organised the Barnsley East school uniform exchange, which was an opportunity for those who had uniforms they no longer needed to pass them on to other families in need. I was blown away by the response. Not only did we manage to provide uniforms for children and families who might have struggled otherwise, but we helped to facilitate a community’s coming together, sharing resources and helping one another out. It was a testament to the incredible generosity in Barnsley, and such was the response that we already have uniforms ready and waiting to go for the next school year, when I plan to continue the exchange.

Ultimately, however, we should not have to rely on the generosity of our friends and neighbours to help provide even the basics, especially when it comes to children and their experiences in education. Provisions and guidance to schools to ensure that uniforms remain affordable and accessible should be reinstated following their dilution under this Government, and greater ability for local authorities to keep the costs down would undoubtedly make a difference. No family should be left vulnerable, and no child left disadvantaged, because of what for too many is the extortionate price of education. Schools, local authorities and communities can come together to tackle the burden, but action must start with the Government.

2.55 pm

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): It is always a pleasure to speak in Westminster Hall. I thank the hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) for what he said; it is nice almost to complete this Parliament in Westminster Hall—I suspect there may be one more debate to come, but that is by the by.

I am very pleased to be involved in this debate, and I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on bringing it forward. This is a massive issue in my constituency. The Minister does not have responsibility for it, because it is a devolved matter—if the Assembly were working, it would be sorting it out—but, if I may, I would like to make some remarks in relation to Northern Ireland.

This is a big issue in my constituency simply because, as the hon. Lady and everyone else who spoke said, a number of families are in the clutches of in-work poverty. That term probably has not been used very often in the House, but it happens to people. I find there is a squeezed lower middle class, who find it more difficult than anybody else just to try to get through because they are outside the benefit system, so they feel the pain. They go to work, yet the money coming in does not satisfy the money going out, particularly in August and September every year, as parents scramble to get school uniforms.

Some retailers that are aware of the pressure on parents offer packages. For instance—nobody will know this—Crawford’s from my advice centre on Frances Street in Newtownards has offers online for all the major schools and some others, designed to help parents get a good deal. Mr Crawford has been doing that for umpteen years, and he does it very well. However, by their nature, offers are time limited, and if someone does not have the money in August and September, they must scrape together even more to meet their child’s basic school needs.

Expensive uniforms are another form of discrimination: if someone cannot afford the uniform, they cannot attend the school. They may have the educational qualities, but can they buy the uniform? No, they cannot. Unfortunately, therefore, parents may have to make difficult decisions for children who have the educational quality. Everybody, including the Minister, wants everyone to have the same opportunity for educational achievement, but someone who is poor and does not have much income will sometimes make decisions based not on how bright wee Johnny or Sally is but on what they can afford.

In 2017, the Northern Ireland Commissioner for Children and Young People published a report stating that the average cost of a school uniform in Northern Ireland is £109 per child, with yearly education costs well over £1,200 a year. I am going to mention some things that hon. Members have already mentioned, because it is important that they are on the record. Last year, a survey found that more than a third of families in Northern Ireland go into debt at the beginning of the new school year because of rising costs. A third of families in Northern Ireland go into debt just to get the uniform to get their children to school. School uniform grants are available from the Education Authority to families in receipt of universal credit or certain other benefits, but, at best, those grants cover only a fraction of the cost of the typical school uniform, and people are struggling greatly.

We should try to encourage children to be active, yet when they join a school club—hockey, football, rugby, athletics or whatever it may be—and travel to matches,
they must be in their PE tracksuit with full school insignia, and then their actual playing gear and all the rest. Again, that is a method of discrimination. It can be heartbreaking for a family on the poverty line to realise that their child is good enough for the school team but that they cannot be part of it because the family cannot afford the prohibitive cost of the uniform. With full PE kits starting at £240—those are the cheaper options—and children needing one at least every other year, that is a massive cost. Let us be honest: the hon. Member for Henley mentioned how a uniform can look well used in a couple of weeks, and PE kits can get damaged as well, so that £240 may be unfortunately only the start of the cost. For that reason, some children are not taking part in school clubs, staying away not because they do not have the interest, the enthusiasm, the energy or the ability but because their mums and dads cannot afford the massive cost.

We are in 2019, and I truly thought these days were behind us, yet it is clear that children are penalised in their education because their parents work as hard as they can but have difficulty just making ends meet. I believed that was why working tax credit was created, to step in, fill the gaps and help with school uniforms and the now obligatory hockey, football, Gaelic football and rugby uniforms, as it should. Yet unfortunately in August and September, and at other times of the year, whenever parents come to see me, I see at first hand in my office that it is not working. We need more help for those who are working and yet are on the breadline—the working poor. That is a real issue.

At this stage, I wish to thank some people in my constituency who do great work. The likes of the Ards Community Network, Friends of Regent House and other residents’ groups have introduced a system, like the one referred to by the hon. Member for Henley, where used uniforms that are still in good condition can be dropped off to help those who cannot do it all. Hon. Members have referred to similar organisations. Those initiatives must be applauded and encouraged, but they highlight the failure of the system we have in place. That we need those initiatives illustrates clearly that we need help.

As a side issue, the Trussell Trust opened its first food bank in Northern Ireland in Newtownards in December 2011. I was there at the opening. It is now operating in more than 20 locations across the region. Families in crisis are up by over 13%. The welfare system is missing those people on the peripheries. I sincerely ask for a review of the school uniform grants procedure to help those on the edge.

I know that this is a devolved matter for Northern Ireland and that the Minister has no responsibility for what happens there, but hon. Members’ reflections are mirrored in my constituency as well. School uniform grants must help those who may be above the threshold on paper but in real life are struggling.

It is so important that children are happy at school. In my constituency and across Northern Ireland—I am sure this affects other hon. Members—we have some of the highest figures for young people at primary school level, and certainly at secondary school level, with mental health problems. Why is that? It is because they are not happy at school. I suggest very gently to the Minister and hon. Members that we must improve the quality of life for our children at school. We must ensure that they all have equal opportunities in education and so on. If that happens, we can make a change. My question to the Minister is this: when will that happen?

3.3 pm

Mike Kane (Wythenshawe and Sale East) (Lab): It is an honour to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I congratulate my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on securing the debate on the last day of this Parliament. It is not quite the graveyard shift, as she put it. We may be competing with the House on who finishes first—I believe the valedictory speeches have just started—and I know you are anxious to get to the final word of this Parliament, Mr Pritchard. I thank my hon. Friend for her work. She is an indefatigable campaigner on education, not just as a former trade unionist in education but as a former teacher, like me. Her passion shines through.

I thank all Members who contributed to the debate. The hon. Member for Henley (John Howell) rightly said that uniforms bring a common identity. Few schools up and down the land do not have some sort of uniform. He also talked about second-hand clothes, as did my hon. Friend. I might not be forgiven for saying this, as a Mancunian MP from Cottonopolis, but we now know that cotton production is one of the greatest polluters on the planet. We must begin to think of new ways to go forward sustainably. Recycling, reuse and reduction of cotton is therefore important.

I was taken aback by the community organising project of my hon. Friend the Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock), putting power into the hands of people who struggle to purchase uniform individually. Bringing people together for a school uniform exchange is a remarkably good idea. If she does not mind, I may steal it for my own constituency.

As ever, whether in Westminster Hall debates or Adjournment debates, the hon. Member for Strangford (Jim Shannon) made some strong points. Poverty is common across our islands, and it is a form of discrimination if parents have to fork out too much for uniforms.

We know that common uniform policy reduces bullying in schools, and I saw it for myself. Sometimes as a schoolteacher I would dread non-uniform days. The school where I taught was in a very mixed area. There were some rich areas from which children would come in wearing designer Nike gear, and some came in wearing supermarket gear. Even at quite a young age, they knew the difference. That is important.

I think of my constituency, which StepChange says has 3,000 families containing 5,000 children in toxic debt—the most in England, for sure—owing about £14 million to utility companies, dependent on payday lenders and pawn brokers to get to the end of the month. They are unable to pay when their white goods break down and they are really struggling to get by. I also have the highest number of social tenants who are impacted by the bedroom tax—or the spare room subsidy. This is therefore a timely debate to finish off this Parliament.

As my hon. Friend the Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle said, nine years of austerity has been unrelenting. Universal credit is failing, driving people to debt and even destitution. For many in my constituency and up and down the land, and particularly for those in
faith communities, the two-child policy for child benefit is an utter disgrace. I pray for the day of a Labour Government. If one comes about in a few weeks’ time, that is one of the first things we will deal with. If we do have a Conservative Government, I pray for the day on which they will change their mind, because it is driving people to despair.

More than 4 million children are growing up in poverty. More than 1 million are forced to go to food banks, and it is predicted to get worse. My food banks coalition came to me towards the end of August—we will all have faced this—saying, “We have run out of food, Mr Kane.” I asked, “Why have you run out of food? We have churches, civil society, supermarkets and business contributing week in, week out.” They said, “It’s school uniform buying week.” They were out of food at the Wythenshawe food bank. The Government should be hanging their head in shame that those families are in that situation.

There are also signs that our increasingly fragmented schools system hampers what we can offer our parents and children. It is a system that allows free schools and academies to act as islands, independent of their communities and the needs of the children they are supposed to support. On this Government’s watch, we have seen parent governors stripped from school governing bodies up and down the land. It is a system with no means by which parents can hold a school to account, and the Government have failed entirely to act on parents’ concerns. Academies and free schools set rigid dress codes with expensive uniforms that cannot be bought on the high street, and children are sent home from school because their parents cannot afford to meet those dress codes.

The system has exacerbated sending children home, with 10,000 children off-rolled in the last year alone. We give a charter to criminals and county line gangs when we send children home and we have no idea where they are. The system is broken. What is the Minister doing to ensure that children do not lose time in school because their parents cannot meet unrealistic demands on school uniforms? When will the Minister ensure that the Government meet their pledge to make school uniform guidance legally binding? What are the Minister and the Government doing to address the ever-increasing challenge faced by parents to pay for the basics? What will they do to ensure that support is available when they have overseen the abolition by stealth of the school uniform grant?

Time after time, Labour has pressed Ministers to take action, but yet again we are well into a school year with parents paying the price for the Government’s failure to act. The Government pledged statutory guidance in 2015, yet, four years and three Prime Ministers on, they still hide behind the excuse that they could not find parliamentary time. It is clearer than ever that parents, children and teachers need a Government that will act on their behalf—a Labour Government with a national education service. Will the Minister pledge to us today to end once and for all the perverse situation whereby poverty acts as a barrier to children attending school?

Finally, may I thank all Members who have contributed today and to the parliamentary Session? Putting one’s name on a ballot paper, from whatever political party, is a brave act: an increasingly braver act these days. I wish all Members good luck and I thank the Minister for his courtesy over the past few years. I have stood opposite him many times in many debates. I thank the House staff, the Doorkeepers and all who keep us safe and functioning in this place.

3.11 pm

The Minister for School Standards (Nick Gibb): It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I hope it will not be for the last time, even if it is the last time during this long parliamentary Session. I echo the comments made by the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East (Mike Kane), whose views I share. It is a worthwhile occupation to stand for election to public office in our great democracy. It is a pity that politicians are treated in the way that too many of us are. We need to do more across parties to re-establish the safety and position of politicians and how they are regarded by the public. I am sure that together we can do a lot to enhance their reputation.

I congratulate the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle (Emma Hardy) on securing this important debate and on her powerful opening speech. I am aware of the hon. Lady’s concerns, given her role as a member of the Education Committee. I also congratulate her on her work with the RE:Uniform campaign, and the hon. Member for Barnsley East (Stephanie Peacock) on similar campaigns in her constituency. Such campaigns facilitate the exchange of second-hand school uniforms for many in both their constituencies. I am sure that the shadow Minister, the hon. Member for Wythenshawe and Sale East, will not be the only person stealing her ideas.

The hon. Gentleman said that school uniforms reduce bullying and that when he was a teacher he dreaded non-school uniform days, which reveal too harshly who has designer clothes and who does not. That is why I am a keen adherent and supporter of school uniform in this country. Where I disagree with him is on how we ensure that poverty is reduced to an absolute minimum. A driving objective of Conservative economic policy is to reduce poverty. We have the lowest level of unemployment since the mid-1970s. There are fewer workless households and fewer children living in workless households today as a consequence of our presiding over a strong and what I would call a stable economy, which is our objective going forward. We want to maintain a stable and strong economy, keeping unemployment low and the number of jobs at record levels. That is how we reduce poverty in this country. Opposition Members should know that no Labour Government has ever left office with unemployment lower than when they came into office. People need to take that very seriously if they are as determined as we are to reduce poverty in this country.

Jim Shannon: I am ever mindful of the different aspect in Northern Ireland, but I am conscious of those who are in in-work poverty. Have the Government had an opportunity to assess the extent of that? In my constituency it is enormous, but I suspect it is the same in every other hon. Member’s.

Nick Gibb: The way to reduce in-work poverty is to have a strong economy that creates the wealth that everybody can benefit from. We introduced the national living wage to ensure that people on low wages gain a
bigger share of the wealth that our economy creates. Also, we have raised the personal allowance tax threshold to something nearer £11,000 or £12,000, so that people on low incomes pay significantly less tax. Millions of people have been taken out of tax altogether. That is how to tackle poverty and low income. A strong economy with very low levels of unemployment means that wages are pushed up because of market forces.

We can all agree that the cost of school uniform is an important issue for many families. I was grateful for the opportunity to speak about it in response to a debate on this topic secured by the right hon. Member for Birkenhead (Frank Field) last year, and I welcome the opportunity to discuss the issue again today. If schools can ensure that uniform items are available at a reasonable cost to parents, there are significant positive benefits that school uniforms can provide. The Government strongly encourage schools to have a school uniform.

It is common for schools also to have a school dress code, and the overwhelming majority of schools require pupils to wear a uniform. A school uniform can play an important role in contributing to the ethos of a school and setting an appropriate tone. It can help foster a sense of equality and belonging for pupils and reduce pressure for pupils and parents to have to spend money on keeping up with the latest fashions or trends. It can also support discipline and motivation among pupils as part of a wider behaviour policy.

A primary purpose of a uniform is to remove differences between pupils. If everyone is dressed the same, it underlines that we are all equal. With a standard uniform in place, it is harder to tell a pupil’s background. In such ways, uniforms can play an important part in helping pupils feel safe and happy at school. Although decisions about school uniform are made by head teachers and governing bodies, and it is right that they continue to make such decisions, I encourage all schools to have uniform policies for the reasons I have outlined.

When speaking about this topic, I have consistently said that I am clear that the cost of uniform should not act as a barrier to obtaining a good school place. I want all children to be able to attend a school of their parents’ choice wherever possible. No school uniform should be so expensive as to leave pupils or their families feeling unable to apply to or attend a school of their choice. That is made very clear in the admissions code.

Holly Lynch: Looking back to when I went to secondary school—which I appreciate is some years ago now—I am reminded that the school provided a list of the uniform and equipment that I would need. The cost of all those things was a challenge for my family, and there were things on that list that we paid for that I never used in five years. Could we not do something very quickly and simply to prevent families from having to fund those costs without additional cost to the Government?

Nick Gibb: Certainly schools should be careful in requiring purchases of equipment that is not needed. It is a loose use of other people’s money by the school, so I share the hon. Lady’s concern about that. I am proud of the pupil premium, which the previous Conservative-led Government introduced. It is about £2.5 billion a year—nearly £1,000 for every secondary school pupil and about £1,300 for every primary school pupil on free school meals. The money can be used to pay for uniforms and equipment that pupils from disadvantaged backgrounds might need to have.

Emma Hardy: One of the points made by some of parents was that when a school is re-brokered as a different academy trust, all the parents then have to buy the new branded uniform for that trust. If the Minister is looking at amending or improving the guidance, could the DfE not say that, in the case of re-brokering, parents will be allowed to continue to use the uniform until the pupil has grown out of it, and can simply purchase new in the new school academy, rather than having to potentially change in September and then in January?

Nick Gibb: The hon. Lady raises a good point. It is something that we will reflect on. I have often seen schools and academies, in such circumstances, provide the uniform for existing pupils, because of course it is a cost that parents will not have expected. There are many ways around the issue, but it needs to be addressed and taken seriously, as the hon. Lady says.

While school uniform can have a hugely positive impact on a school, by providing cohesion and community for the pupil population, it may present a financial burden to some—particularly to families on low incomes—as has been widely discussed in this important debate. In 2015, the Department commissioned the “Cost of school uniform” survey, which provided the most recent information that we hold on the cost of school uniform and indicated that the average cost of most items decreased between 2007 and 2015—the date of the report—when adjusted for inflation. Moreover, most parents were pleased with the overall cost and quality of their child’s uniform. More than two thirds of parents were happy with the cost of uniform and PE kit. However, in the same survey nearly one fifth of parents reported that they had suffered financial hardship as a result of purchasing their child’s school uniform. It is therefore vital that we do what we can to ensure that school uniform is accessible for all, no matter what the family’s budget.

It is for the governing body of a school, or the academy trust, in the case of academies, to decide whether there should be a school uniform policy, and if so, what it should be. It is also for the governing body to decide how the uniform should be sourced. However, we are clear that governing bodies should give cost considerations the highest priority when making decisions about school uniform. The Department published best practice guidance for school leaders on developing and implementing school uniform policy. That guidance sets out that a school should ensure that its school uniform policy is fair and reasonable for all its students. It should make certain that the uniform is affordable and does not act as a barrier to parents when choosing a school.

School uniform should be easily available for parents to purchase. In particular, the guidance specifically states that schools should seek to select items that can be purchased cheaply—for example, in a supermarket. Parents can shop around for items of uniform, that can encourage competition and enable them to buy their uniform from a retailer at a price that suits their household budget. The Department’s guidance advises...
schools that, in setting their school uniform policy, they should give the highest priority to cost considerations and achieving value for money for parents.

I am aware that a concern is often mentioned in this context about branded items of uniform, and how those are supplied—something that has been mentioned in the debate. We recognise that schools will often want to adopt items of uniform that are specific to that school, such as a branded blazer or tie. The Department, however, advises schools to keep such branded items of uniform to a minimum, as multiple branded items can significantly increase costs. We recommend that schools should avoid exclusive single-supplier contracts, as those could risk driving up costs. Where schools choose to enter into such contracts, which in some cases may be the best option, they should ensure that they are subject to a regular competitive tendering process to ensure the best value for money.

The hon. Member for Barnsley East raised the issue of schools that receive a financial incentive to use a specified supplier. The guidance explicitly states:

“Schools should not enter into cash back arrangements.”

It is very clear about that. If parents have concerns about the school uniform supply arrangements in relation to competition law, they can raise them with the Competition and Markets Authority. As you may be aware, Mr Pritchard, the CMA wrote an open letter to schools and school uniform suppliers, which provides more detail about its policy, and what powers it has, regarding the appointment of exclusive suppliers for school uniform.

With reference to the request of my hon. Friend the Member for Henley (John Howell), he will be pleased to know that the Government have committed to putting our best practice guidance on school uniform on to a statutory footing. Opposition Members also made that request. The Secretary of State and the CMA recently engaged in an exchange of open letters on the matter of single-supplier contracts.

Stephanie Peacock: I believe that the Welsh Government used powers provided in the Education Act 2002 and the Education and Inspections Act 2006, which were passed under a Labour Government, to issue their statutory guidance. Why has the Minister not done the same?

Nick Gibb: We keep those issues under review. As has been pointed out, we are running out of time in this Session, but if a Conservative Government are returned with a functioning majority, I am sure that we will give urgent priority to legislating on the matter in question.

The CMA stated its approval of our commitment to place our guidance on a statutory footing when a suitable legislative opportunity arises, as I am sure it will after the general election. In turn, the Secretary of State has reaffirmed our commitment to do so, which will send a clear signal that we expect schools to ensure that uniform costs are reasonable. I should make it clear that the Government’s stated intention to make school uniform affordable does not undermine our commitment to the principle of uniform itself. Putting our guidance on a statutory footing is directly intended to ensure that school uniforms are affordable for all.

In England, some local authorities provide discretionary grants to help with buying school uniforms. It is a matter for the local authority to decide whether to offer those grants and to set their own criteria for eligibility. Schools may offer individual clothing schemes, such as offering second-hand uniform at reduced prices, as in the uniform scheme that we have heard about today. As I have said, schools can choose to use their pupil premium funding to offer subsidies or grants for school uniforms. Again, that will be a decision for the school to make.

I am enormously grateful for the support that the hon. Member for Kingston upon Hull West and Hessle has given on this issue. She has raised some important concerns, and I hope that she is relatively happy that the Government also recognise the cost of school uniform as important. We want all children, wherever they are and whatever their background, to be able to secure a good school place, and we do not want the cost of uniform to act as a barrier. The steps that we have taken underline the importance of the cost of school uniform in helping the most disadvantaged members of our society to get access to a good education. The Government have made a commitment to legislate on the issue, which we intend to honour.

Emma Hardy: I thank all Members who have taken part in this debate. There has been broad agreement on the need to have a school uniform, as it helps to disguise some of the differences in income levels between families. There is also broad agreement on where we need to go forward. Let me push the Minister a little further. He referred to statutory guidance, but I think that should also include a limit on the number of branded items that can be required, and on overall cost. Schools should be encouraged to show and share the cost of their uniforms.

I have one final little push—“If you don’t ask, you don’t get”, as I was always told—to ask whether the Minister will consider introducing grants that are available throughout England, and not linked to a local authority’s ability to pay for them. We know that local authorities have suffered cuts and cannot afford to pay for those grants, but they should be available to every child, regardless of where they live. On that slightly demanding note, I thank all hon. Members—it has been a pleasure to take part in this debate and to continue campaigning on education; and, in the words of Arnie Schwarzenegger, “I’ll be back.”

Question put and agreed to.

Resolved.

That this House has considered school uniform costs.

Sitting suspended.
Renaissance of East Anglian Fisheries Study

4 pm

Peter Aldous (Waveney) (Con): I beg to move, That this House has considered the recommendations of the Renaissance of East Anglian Fisheries study.

It is a pleasure to serve under your chairmanship, Mr Pritchard. I also welcome my hon. Friend the Minister to his place. He has been very supportive of proposals to revitalise the UK fishing industry, and through the Fisheries Bill, which I hope is only temporarily stalled, he has provided a framework for doing that.

My interest is in the East Anglian coast, which runs for 208 miles from King's Lynn in Norfolk to Leigh-on-Sea in Essex, with Lowestoft in Suffolk, in my constituency, geographically at its centre. Lowestoft is historically the fishing capital of the southern North sea, and the hope is that in the future, if we make the most of the opportunity that Brexit presents, it will be the regional hub port at the heart of a revived but modern fishing industry that plays a key role in the regeneration of coastal communities.

REAF—the Renaissance of East Anglian Fisheries—is a community-led group that has come together to produce a long-term strategy for fishing in the region. Work began in 2018 as a result of the joint endeavours of East Suffolk Council, June Mummery, Paul Lines and me. A partnership was formed between the regional industry, East Suffolk Council, Suffolk County Council, Norfolk County Council, the New Anglia local enterprise partnership, Seafish, and Associated British Ports. Funding was provided by the participating councils, Seafish, and the European maritime and fisheries fund, via the Marine Management Organisation. East Suffolk Council has given invaluable administrative and project management support and has hosted our meetings.

The REAF report was prepared by its members, with advice from Rodney Anderson and research and analysis from Vivid Economics. The strategy builds on the insights of numerous stakeholders and expert interviews across the whole industry, as well as conversations with regulators and public bodies. Special thanks go to all those who have contributed to the project.

There is a long history of fishing along the East Anglian coast. However, over the past 40 years, its importance to the area has significantly declined, and in Lowestoft, where it used to underpin the local economy, the industry is currently a very pale shadow of its former self. Across the region, the industry covers a diverse range of fleets and activities, including a shellfish fleet; an inshore fleet catching flatfish; some offshore vessels; and various other ancillary activities.

Jim Shannon (Strangford) (DUP): I thank the hon. Gentleman for initiating the debate. Is he aware that UK vessels land some 40% of the catch from UK waters, whereas Norway and Iceland, for instance, land 83% and 90% respectively of theirs? The report to which he is referring makes it clear that East Anglia's inshore fleet does not get a fair slice of the cake and there is scope for renewal of the fisheries employment sector in that area. It is very similar to my own area, the constituency of Strangford, and indeed my own village of Portavogie, which once had two fish processing plants. Does the hon. Gentleman agree that, with the correct exit policy—the Minister will probably confirm this—we could again see business opening up and thriving in all our fishing ports and surrounding areas across the whole United Kingdom of Great Britain and Northern Ireland?

Peter Aldous: I thank my hon. Friend for that intervention. I shall cover a lot of the issues that he has raised in my speech, but I will highlight two things immediately. First, he is correct to say that, with the opportunity to land more fish in UK ports, the whole of the country and particularly our coastal communities could benefit. Secondly, the point I will be making is that although the REAF report is very much bespoke to the East Anglian area, there is no reason why similar reports could not be produced for other regions, such as the one that he represents.

The total reported value of the catch of commercial species from the southern North sea has in recent years varied between £190 million and £260 million, and only between 7% and 8% is landed by the UK fleet. Most fin fish are currently landed overseas, in ports in the Netherlands and France, with shellfish landings taking place off the west Norfolk coast and in the Essex estuaries. A varying but low number of UK-registered offshore vessels are operating in the southern North sea, but the vessels land only low values into regional ports because of their foreign ownership. The Lowestoft Fish Producers’ Organisation lands its fish in the Netherlands, not in Lowestoft.

The specialist modern vessels represent a substantial investment, made possible by access to UK waters under the common fisheries policy and through the purchase of access to UK quotas. They are said to comply with the CFP’s economic link obligation, mostly by gifting some quota to the UK. However, although East Anglia sits next to one of the richest fishing fields in Europe, very little local benefit is in practice currently derived from it.

Some Dutch demersal trawlers have used pulse fishing, which employs electric currents to force fish from the seabed—a technique that the European Parliament voted to ban with effect from January of this year, although 5% of the fleet of the North sea is permitted to continue for scientific purposes until 2021.

At present, we have a system that not only brings very little benefit to the East Anglian fishing industry, but is extremely environmentally damaging. This study’s main finding is that the UK’s departure from the CFP provides a remarkable opportunity to bring about a renaissance of East Anglian fisheries. However, that will be achieved only if our leaving the EU is accompanied by well-designed national policy and regulation that provide the framework for regional strategies such as REAF.

The report concludes that there is the opportunity to increase UK vessel quota catch in the southern North sea by seven times its value and UK vessel non-quota catch by 25%. That will together add 25 or more vessels to the UK fleet, creating jobs both offshore and onshore. Upt to 17,000 additional tonnes per year of allowed catch will become available to UK-registered vessels in the southern North sea, potentially being able to be landed and processed in the UK. That will come about
through a change in the way the fishing opportunity in the North sea is allocated between countries as we move to a geographic area allocation under the international law of the sea, known as zonal attachment, replacing the current basis for fish catches, known as the relative stability rule of the common fisheries policy. It is vital that zonal attachment and a requirement to land fish in the UK are the basis of any future agreement with the EU. Such a change would allocate the aforementioned sevenfold greater catch of quota stock value to the UK from the southern North sea; it would be worth approximately £28 million to £34 million at the quayside. That includes an eightfold volume increase in sole, a tenfold increase in herring and an elevenfold increase in plaice.

In addition, the economic link rule, which the UK uses to regulate the activities of vessels fishing UK fish stocks, should be strengthened so as to promote the landing of fish in UK ports. The potential benefits could increase further as fish stocks improve through effective management and as the regional fleet becomes more competitive and more efficient. In addition, there may be more opportunities to start harvesting crabs further offshore and to expand oyster cultivation.

To realise that opportunity, the REAF strategy makes 11 recommendations, which I will briefly outline. They fall into three categories of change. The first is economic change, bringing potentially rewarding and well-paid jobs to the East Anglian coast for not just the catch sector, but the whole length of the supply chain, from the net to the plate.

In brief, the 11 recommendations can be summarised quickly as follows: introducing a new system of control in the inshore fleet through hours-at-sea restrictions and the use of gear; requiring the offshore fleet to land its catch in the UK and restricting it from fishing within 12 nautical miles of the coast; considering restricting offshore vessels to 500 hp and banning beam trawling; investing in a regional hub fishing port in Lowestoft; providing access to finance for the scaling-up and automation of the processing sector; upgrading the control regime for anglers; removing barriers to aquaculture expansion by de-risking developments and improving access to finance; setting up an apprenticeship scheme; combining the two inshore fisheries and conservation authorities and the Marine Management Organisation into a new single East Anglia regional fisheries authority; managing fishing stocks as a mixed fishery and introducing more effective controls over fishing mortality; and, finally, making more use of data to manage potential conflicts between fishermen and other marine activities, such as wind farms and dredging.

The REAF study is very much a living document. It is not a piece of academic research purely designed to provoke contemplation and debate. It sets out a range of practical recommendations that, if implemented, could bring significant benefits to local people, communities and businesses. Brexit on its own is not a magic wand that will revitalise our fishing industry, but it gives us the opportunity to start again with a clean sheet of paper, to pursue innovative and radical policies that can bring real benefits to East Anglian coastal communities. We need to get Brexit done, so that we can get on with putting in place strategies such as REAF.

So that East Anglia can get on with this work, I ask the Minister in his response to confirm support for the following first steps. First, it would be appreciated if he could ask his officials at the Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs—who have been extremely helpful in this process—to continue to work with the REAF team, so that a strategy can be agreed for starting work on implementing the study’s recommendations. This regional approach to fisheries management will help to secure the Brexit dividend, and REAF provides a blueprint that could be used elsewhere around the UK coast.

Secondly, seedcorn funding should be provided, so that REAF can carry on into its next phase. East Suffolk Council has confirmed that it is prepared to continue to offer support and host meetings. It will convene a new REAF group and oversee the preparation of the first year’s programme of works. However, it does not have a budget to fund anything more than basic secretarial support. To take the project forward, there is a need for a full-time outreach worker, a liaison officer, who will foster, galvanise, encourage, interpret and explain. This person would spend the first six months of their time visiting ports and landing places, working with fishermen, talking to processors and hauliers, and generally obtaining further background information. This person will play a crucial role in advising the steering group about the practicalities of what is or is not happening on the ground. They will feed back to the different sectors of the industry and ensure that they continue to be fully supportive of the project. This will mean constantly getting out and about at times that suit the industry, not standard office hours. They will be the linchpin of the project. A dedicated project manager and administrative backup are also required, as well as a modest level of specialist consultancy support.
Thirdly, we need to promote a new approach to managing mixed fisheries by controlling the inshore fleet through hours-at-sea restrictions. The Minister has previously indicated that the Government will carry out an hours-at-sea pilot; we ask for that pilot to take place in East Anglia.

Fourthly, it is important that we put in place an apprenticeship scheme for those wanting to pursue a career in the industry. That will include establishing an apprenticeship training programme for future skippers, funded by the national apprenticeship levy; preparing a careers in fishing brochure to accompany the scheme; and making available finance for graduates from the scheme, to support them in acquiring a vessel and a licence. East Coast College in Lowestoft wishes to be involved in this scheme, and there is a need to forge the proposals into a deliverable project.

Fifthly, Lowestoft wants to regain its crown as the capital of the southern North sea. That will require a fishing port development study to be prepared, working in close collaboration with Associated British Ports, the owners of Lowestoft port. The scope of the project could include a new fish unloading quay, berthing and provisioning facilities, and the creation of a new fish market. This would provide the port with the capacity to handle shellfish and both inshore and offshore vessels.

Sixthly, following Brexit, there will be a need for investment in the processing sector, not just in East Anglia but nationally. A scheme needs to be set up for which East Anglian processors can apply, and it should mirror the support that Marine Scotland provides to Scottish processors. My seventh and final ask is that we start work on forming the new single East Anglia regional fisheries authority, which will provide clear and visible signs on the ground of improvement in regulatory operations.

I suspect that I have spoken for too long and I apologise. I hope that I have illustrated that we have a detailed plan for securing REAF—the Renaissance of East Anglian Fisheries. We now want to get on with delivering that plan, and I look forward to hearing from the Minister that he supports that local ambition and making it available finance for graduates from the scheme; in East Anglia.

In the original Bill, we set out a number of important approaches. Clause 1 set out a whole series of fisheries objectives, including objectives for fishing sustainably and towards maximum sustainable yield. It was very clear that we would take control of our exclusive economic zone, which means controlling access out to 200 nautical miles or the median line.

There were also ideas to improve the way in which the discard ban works. For example, a discard disincentive scheme would create a national reserve that fishermen with out-of-quota stock could access, and they would have to pay a penalty so that there was no incentive for them to target vulnerable stocks. In addition, we would have made it easier for them to avoid their current problem of choke species. Our fisheries White Paper was also clear that we would depart from relative stability—the EU sharing arrangements—and move to a new and more scientific sharing arrangement, based on zonal attachment, to which my hon. Friend referred.

We have also been clear that as we depart from relative stability and transition to this new and more scientific approach, under which we will have additional catching opportunities, we will use a different methodology to allocate any new quota coming into the UK. Although we want to keep some stability in the short term by keeping the current fixed quota allocation units for existing quota, additional opportunities will be distributed using different criteria. We are interested in giving additional quota to the inshore fleet—the under-10 pool, as it is currently described. We may tender some quota to existing producer organisations, based on their track record of sustainability. We will also, as I have said, keep some of that quota back for a national reserve.

Into the mix of this quite exciting change for our fisheries policy comes the Renaissance of East Anglian Fisheries initiative. As my hon. Friend said, there are many groups involved, including the local authority, SeaFish and a number of local groups. I commend the work he has done in holding the ring and organising many events to promote its objectives. Indeed, I was very pleased to be able to attend the launch of the report.

The historic reason why relative stability does not work for many of our coastal communities, in particular those around East Anglia, is broadly as follows. During the 1950s, 1960s and 1970s, most of our fishing fleet were catching cod in Icelandic waters, we were fishing less in our own waters, and other countries—mainly near neighbours in Europe—were fishing in those UK waters. It was very unlucky for us, in the way that sometimes happens to our country, that just as we were driven out of our Icelandic fishing grounds, where we had historic rights—we were driven right out to 200 nautical miles, following our defeat in the third cod war—we had already given the European Union control of our waters. The sharing arrangements were therefore set in concrete. To compound matters, the catch data that some of our smaller vessels had was not as comprehensive and detailed as the data that other EU countries purported to have. That created an unfairness in the sharing methodology, which, as my hon. Friend pointed out, has continued to this day.

I turn now to the points raised by my hon. Friend and the report. I have to say that he had many asks, but I will try to deal with as many of them as possible. First, there was a proposal to close the inshore pool and to
have instead a system based on effort or hours at sea. As my hon. Friend knows, our White Paper was clear that we want to pilot such a system. When it comes to the inshore fleet, there is a case to be made that sometimes an effort-based regime is more appropriate for those smaller inshore vessels, because they have a small amount of quota for a large range of stocks, and a quota system does not work that well for them. There are, however, drawbacks to an effort-based system. A pilot in Ramsgate about seven years ago was not particularly successful, so we need to learn the lessons. Nevertheless, I am open to doing it. A quota system will always be the right approach for larger trawlers and offshore vessels, because an effort-based regime is not the correct approach when it comes to pelagic fish, which have very large stocks.

Secondly, my hon. Friend asked that we require offshore vessels to land their catch in the UK and to restrict their fishing within the 12 nautical miles. He will be aware that we have given notice to quit the London fisheries convention. That expired in July. Therefore, when we leave the European Union, the historic access rights that some foreign vessels have had to fish within the six to 12-mile zone will expire. It is our intention that the 0 to 12-mile zone—our territorial waters—will be predominantly reserved for British vessels, and we will seek to restrict the access of foreign vessels to those waters.

We are also reviewing the economic link. That could include requiring vessels to land a greater proportion of their catch in the UK, so that what they catch is of benefit to communities such as those in my hon. Friend’s constituency. We must, however, take into account certain considerations when adopting such an approach. Last year I visited the Faroes, which required 100% of catch to be landed in the Faroes. However, their fishermen complained that that meant that they were, in effect, captured by processors and did not have other market alternatives. There are, therefore, reasons for allowing some catch to be landed outside the UK, but we are seeking to strengthen the economic link.

A number of the other issues raised by my hon. Friend relate to funding. We will replace the European maritime and fisheries fund. We have also announced a new domestic maritime fund, precisely to support fish processing and harbour and port facilities to help projects such as that under discussion.

The report proposes that the inshore fisheries and conservation authorities and the Marine Management Organisation should be combined into a single force. There is a reason why IFCAs were created. Previously they did not have an enforcement role; they had a management role and the MMO did all the enforcement.

There was criticism that individual localities did not get the attention that they felt they deserved, and that is why IFCAs were given an enforcement role. Nevertheless, my hon. Friend is right that there is a case for joining up more closely the efforts of the IFCAs and the MMO. That is why we formed the Joint Maritime Operations Coordination Centre, where everybody—from the coastguard to the MMO and IFCAs—can work together to co-ordinate their assets in a single approach to the issue of enforcement.

Finally, my hon. Friend says that we should manage stocks as a mixed fishery and implement more effective controls for fishing mortality. CEFAS, which is based in Lowestoft, has done a lot of groundbreaking work. Our chief fisheries scientist, Carl O’Brien, has been a leading light in developing some of the methodologies for mixed fisheries analysis, and this is something that the UK is keen to pursue.

In conclusion, I welcome the REAF report and commend my hon. Friend for his work. As for where we go from here, I stand ready to work with him in the future, should we both be returned to this place, to further develop the thinking. When it comes to administrative support for the project, I know that SeaFish has been involved and I think it would also be good to engage the local enterprise partnership in the process, to help to support bids. The time will come, however, when REAF will, I presume, want to turn its ideas into a grant bid to one of our maritime funds—either an existing fund or a future one—and at that point my Department and the MMO would stand ready to assess that application. My hon. Friend will be fully aware that I cannot give any cast-iron guarantees that it will get support, but I can guarantee that it will be given full consideration. I thank my hon. Friend again for his work and I commend him for the points he raised.

Mark Pritchard (in the Chair): Before I adjourn this sitting, I would like to thank, I am sure on behalf of all colleagues, the Clerks, the attendants and the security officers outside, the sound and broadcasting staff, who of course are never seen but do an excellent job every time we sit in Westminster Hall, and the Hansard staff for their excellent coverage of our debates. Indeed, I thank all the staff of the House in what has been a very short parliamentary Session following one of the longest parliamentary Sessions in the last 450 years of our history. I thank you all.

I can now say, for the last time in this Parliament, that the sitting stands adjourned.

4.30 pm

Motion lapsed, and sitting adjourned without Question put (Standing Order No.10(14)).
The Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):
The Equivalence Determinations for Financial Services and Miscellaneous Provisions (Amendment etc) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I. 2019/541), provides powers for HM Treasury, for up to 12 months after exit day, to make equivalence directions and exemption directions for the European Union and EEA member states.

On 11 April 2019, I laid before Parliament HM Treasury directions under those powers to help to ensure that the UK will have a functioning regulatory regime for financial services in all scenarios. Today, I have laid before Parliament two further directions in preparation for the UK’s withdrawal from the EU.

The Prospectus Directive and Transparency Directive Equivalence (Variation) Directions 2019 amend a previous direction made on 11 April 2019. The existing equivalence direction determines that EU-adopted International Financial Reporting Standards (IFRS) are considered equivalent to UK-adopted international accounting standards for the purpose of preparing financial statements for transparency directive regime requirements and for the purpose of preparing a prospectus under the prospectus directive regime. This decision delivered on a commitment made by the Government in November 2018, allowing overseas issuers with securities admitted to trading on a UK regulated market, or overseas issuers making an offer of securities in the UK, to continue to use EU-adopted IFRS when preparing their consolidated financial accounts for future accounting years.

On 21 July 2019, the prospectus regulation came into full application in EU legislation, and the prospectus directive, including the UK domestic legislation implementing the directive, was repealed. HM Treasury has made the Prospectus (Amendment etc.) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 (S.I. 2019/1234) to ensure that there continues to be a coherent and functioning prospectus regime in the event that the UK leaves the EU without an agreement on 31 October 2019. This new equivalence direction therefore amends the existing direction to refer to prospectuses being prepared under the prospectus regulation rather than the directive. This amending direction ensures that the existing equivalence direction continues to be legally operable and does not change its intended effect.

The markets in financial instruments exemption directions 2019 give effect to the decision taken by HM Treasury, the European Union and the EEA European Free Trade Association countries to exempt central banks of certain states, including EEA states, from certain provisions under the markets in financial instruments regulation in the event that the United Kingdom leaves the European Union without an agreement. This direction is necessary because adaptations to the EEA agreement granting the relevant exemption are not yet operative for all affected EEA central banks. This direction will therefore ensure that those affected EEA central banks can continue to carry on their activities in the UK without disruption at exit.

Copies of the directions are available in the Vote Office and Printed Paper Office and will be published alongside the Equivalence Determinations for Financial Services and Miscellaneous Provisions (Amendment etc) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 on Legislation.gov.uk.

[HCWS46]

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Telecoms Update

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nicky Morgan): I wish to inform Members that today I made an oral statement to the House concerning the announcement on Friday 25 October that the Government support a Shared Rural Network programme, subject to binding legal agreement.

[HCWS45]

INTERNATIONAL DEVELOPMENT

Departmental Update

The Secretary of State for International Development (Alok Sharma): The United Kingdom is a development superpower. We are the only country that is simultaneously meeting the NATO target of spending 2% of our gross domestic product on defence and the UN target of spending 0.7% of gross national income on international development. We should be proud of meeting both those targets, maintaining our security while supporting some of the poorest and most vulnerable people in the world. Our commitment to ending global poverty and delivering the sustainable development goals (SDGs) makes the world safer, healthier and more prosperous for us all.

As we enter a new Session of Parliament, we will maintain our commitment to helping the world’s poorest. As we leave the European Union, the UK’s development work and use of ODA sit at the heart of our international agenda.

I would like to update the House on some of DFID’s key achievements since 2015:

- Over 14 million children gained a decent education, of whom almost six million are girls.
- More than 32 million people have been supported with humanitarian assistance, including at least 10 million women and girls.
- Some 60.3 million women, children under five and adolescent girls have been reached with nutrition-relevant programmes.
- Almost 52 million people have been supported to gain access to clean water or improved sanitation.
- Some 3.9 million people supported to raise their incomes or maintain/gain a better job or livelihood.
As a result of our work, by 2020, 76 million children will have been immunised, with over one million lives saved.

A number of these achievements were reflected in our 2019 voluntary national review of how the UK is supporting the SDGs at home and abroad. They build on what DFID delivered between 2011 and 2015:

- Supported 11.3 million children in primary and lower secondary education, of whom 5.3 million were girls.
- Reached 30 million children under five and pregnant women through DFID’s nutrition-relevant programmes, of whom 12.1 million were women or girls.
- Supported over 64 million people, of whom at least 22.6 million were women, to access clean water, better sanitation or improved hygiene conditions.
- Ensured 5.6 million births took place safely in the presence of nurses, midwives or doctors.
- Overall 80,100 mothers have been saved during child birth along with 226,000 babies during this period.
- Distributed 49.7 million long-lasting insecticide-treated bed nets, to people at risk from malaria.

UK international climate finance (ICF) programmes have supported 57 million people to cope with the effects of climate change over the last eight years. ICF programmes have provided 26 million people with improved access to clean energy, helping to reduce greenhouse gas emissions by 16 million tonnes—the equivalent of taking three million cars off the road for a year. Through the Global Environment Facility, the UK has also contributed to creating nature protection zones equivalent to the size of Brazil.

At the 74th United Nations General Assembly, we launched a new partnership to help make one billion people safer from disaster by improving early warning systems and the capacity to act on risks. The Prime Minister also announced: the doubling of UK ICF to £11.6 billion over five years from 2021; a biodiversity and forests package to protect and restore the world’s forests; and support to the efforts of British and international scientists, innovators and entrepreneurs to create new clean energy technologies through the new £1 billion Ayrton fund.

The UK is a leader on global health, and by 2020 will have helped vaccinate 76 million children, saving 1.4 million lives from vaccine-preventable diseases. I recently announced that the UK will step up efforts to end preventable deaths of mothers, new-born babies and children in the developing world by 2030. The UK committed £400 million between 2013-20 to the Global Polio Eradication Initiative, which contributed to the vaccination of approximately 400 million children against polio every year. Polio is a development success story; from being present in 125 countries in 1988 to wild polio cases reported in only two countries in 2019. The UK is contributing £1.4 billion to the replenishment of the Global Fund to Fight AIDS, TB and Malaria (2020-22) and will host the replenishment of Gavi, the Vaccine Alliance, next year following a commitment of £1.44 billion between 2016 and 2020.

DFID plays a leading role in tackling the barriers girls and women face in achieving their potential. Since 2015, DFID’s nutrition-relevant programmes have reached 60.3 million women, children under five and adolescent girls. In 2018-19 the UK helped to prevent 7.3 million unintended pregnancies, save 8,300 maternal lives, and prevent the traumas of 89,900 still births and 52,900 newborn deaths. In 2018, we announced £50 million—the largest single investment worldwide to date by any international donor—towards ending female genital mutilation. Last month, I announced a new £600 million programme that will give over 20 million women and girls access to family planning per year over the next five years, saving tens of thousands of lives—a sign of the UK’s commitment to women and girls’ sexual and reproductive health and rights around the world. DFID is a world leader in preventing violence against women and girls. We are pioneering approaches around the world that have shown reductions in violence of around 50%—proving that violence against women and girls is preventable.

Since 2015, DFID has supported 14.3 million children around the world to gain a decent education, of which at least 5.8 million were girls. DFID spearheads the Leave No Girl Behind Campaign, launched at the Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting in 2018. At the G7 summit in August the Prime Minister announced a £90 million package for education in emergencies and protracted crises that will support 600,000 children.

Our ultimate goal is to support countries, allowing them to help themselves, enabling them to become economically self-sustaining—as a route towards ending global poverty. Governments around the world collectively spend around $140 billion every year on aid. However, the United Nations estimates that an additional $2.5 trillion is required annually in developing countries to meet the SDGs. That investment gap needs to be met largely by the private sector. That is why I have set up an International Development Infrastructure Commission to advise on how we can mobilise additional private sector funds.

The UK-Africa investment summit next January will showcase the City of London as a world-class financial centre and demonstrate its offer to economies across the developing world. Increased investment will lead to more jobs, better access to basic services and opportunities for businesses.

The UK is leading the way to build sustainable economies. It is my ambition that within 10 years our partner countries will raise 10 times more resource through private sector investment and their own tax revenues than they receive in UK aid. The Organisation for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) estimates the average developing country generates tax revenues than they receive in UK aid.

While being a strong supporter of the OECD Development Assistance Committee, the UK is working to update the official development assistance (ODA) rules to ensure they reflect the breadth of UK assistance around the world. Reform is about getting the most out
of the 0.7% commitment for the world’s poorest and UK taxpayers. For example, we secured an increase in the percentage of contributions to UN peacekeeping missions in ODA eligible countries that count as aid, from 7% to 15%.

These efforts to build on the reforms to the aid budget that have been delivered since 2010, such as:

- Aid spending is now more transparent and accountable. Details of DFID programmes are published on DevTracker, with spend over £500 and information for contracts worth over £10,000 published on gov.uk. In addition, before financial aid is provided, DFID checks the risks of corruption and only provides funding if it is clear that the money will be used for the intended purposes.
- An independent body to oversee aid spending. In 2011 we set up an independent body to scrutinise aid spending. The Independent Commission for Aid Impact, which examines ODA spend across Government, assesses how we drive efficiency, value for money and reach those most in need.
- Stopped traditional bilateral programmes to those who had the means to self-finance their own way out of extreme poverty. We did a review in 2011 of where the UK’s aid money was being spent which led to the ending of bilateral aid programmes in, for example: Angola, Cambodia, China, Gambia, Moldova, Russia, Serbia and Vietnam. Some of these countries may still need a different type of support to mobilise their own resources and prevent reversals.
- Ending traditional aid to India. In 2012 we announced we would end traditional aid to India by 2015. Since 2015 our new development partnership with India has focused on the poorest and most marginalised people through offering world leading expertise, skills, and investment to India in areas such as urban development, financial services and energy.
- Stopped money going to ineffective aid organisations. The multilateral aid reviews (MDRs) in 2011 and 2016 assessed multilateral agencies that received over £1 million in DFID core funding by testing alignment with UK priorities and their organisational effectiveness. On the basis of the 2011 review, we took the decision to stop providing core funding to four institutions. We are clear that our multilateral investments must be clearly justified in relation to UK priorities, multilateral performance and value for money, and—like all DFID programmes—are regularly assessed to ensure they deliver results, remain cost-effective and prove good value for money for UK taxpayers. Reform priorities from the 2016 MDR were embedded in multilateral programmes and continue to be monitored as part of the annual review process, which in turn inform future funding decisions.

PRIME MINISTER

Early General Election: Date of Poll

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): The Government have tabled a motion proposing that an early general election be held. The motion is in the terms set out in section 2(2) of the Fixed-term Parliaments Act 2011. If agreed to by a super-majority of the House of Commons, an early election will take place in accordance with that Act.

In the event this House approves the motion for an early election, I will recommend that Her Majesty the Queen appoints 12 December as the date of the general election. This would mean Parliament dissolving just after midnight on 6 November.

In line with the Fixed-term Parliaments Act, the date of Parliament’s return will be set by Royal Proclamation following Dissolution, and I will recommend to The Queen that the first meeting of the new Parliament takes place before 23 December.

[HCWS44]
Member states also discussed the potential effects of the recent announcement of the United States to impose additional duties on a list of EU agrifood products as a consequence of the airbus World Trade Organisation (WTO) judgement. The UK called for a united approach to achieve a negotiated settlement. Commissioner Hogan underscored the Commission’s commitment to protect EU food production and geographical indications (GIs), including through intervention and the promotion of aid if necessary.

On forestry, member states held an exchange of views on the Commission’s communication on stepping up EU action to protect and restore the world’s forests. Together with other members of the Amsterdam declaration partnership, the UK highlighted the need for action and outlined its own initiatives. The Council also held an exchange of views on the EU forest strategy post-2020 and was informed about a joint statement by various member states on sustainable forestry.

Further items were discussed under ‘any other business’:

On agriculture, member states discussed the progress report on the work relating to the post-2020 Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform package. During the debate, the French delegation presented a common paper on the CAP budget on behalf of a number of member states. Their proposal to maintain the CAP budget at the current EU27 level under the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) post-2020. Elements relating to the monitoring and evaluation of the MFF were added to the Council’s mandate for its negotiations with the European Parliament.

On agriculture, member states discussed the progress report on the work relating to the post-2020 Common Agricultural Policy (CAP) reform package. During the debate, the French delegation presented a common paper on the CAP budget on behalf of a number of member states. Their proposal to maintain the CAP budget at the current EU27 level under the next Multiannual Financial Framework (MFF) received support from a number of delegations.

The Commission updated member states about the current situation on African swine fever (ASF), asking member states to consider increasing national measures. Czechia presented a declaration on combating ASF, calling for further multinational collaboration, additional EU co-funding and intensified research. The French delegation presented a joint declaration on wolf management on behalf of a number of member states. The signatory member states asked the Commission to consider their concerns when revising the guidance on the protection of species under the habitats directive, providing flexibility in the sustainable management of wolf populations.

The Commission updated member states about the state of play on major issues in food safety, outlining the most important achievements of its term. This included the overhaul of the official controls legislation, improvements to animal health law and animal welfare, improved plant health legislation, and risk assessment in the food chain. In the context of the debate, the Belgian delegation gave an overview of the recent cases of Listeria monocytogenes in the EU, stressing the need to increase collaboration in order to detect transboundary outbreaks earlier.
The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst): The Government will today publish the report on the statutory post-implementation review of the People with Significant Control (PSC) regulations. We are required to complete a PIR by virtue of various regulations:

- Small Business, Enterprise and Employment Act 2015;
- The Register of People with Significant Control Regulations 2016;
- The Limited Liability Partnerships (Register of People with Significant Control) Regulations 2016;
- The Scottish Partnerships (Register of People with Significant Control) Regulations 2017. The People with Significant Control (PSC) register was established in 2016 to enhance the transparency of ultimate (beneficial) ownership of UK companies. The goals of the register are to promote good corporate behaviour and to deter illicit activity. UK companies and partnerships in scope of the regulations are required to keep a register of their beneficial owners and to report this information to Companies House.

This is the first review of the PSC regulations since the register was established. My Department assessed the operation of the register, the stakeholder engagement with it and the burdens the requirements place on business.

The review report concludes that the PSC register is meeting its objectives and that the costs to business have been proportionate and in line with the original estimates. The register is widely used, has a positive economic effect and contributes to the fight against criminal use of companies.

The report notes the importance of ensuring the reliability of the PSC register information. This is being considered and will be addressed as part of the wider review of the corporate transparency and register reform.

The PSC regulations will, therefore, remain in their current form and we will continue to monitor the operation of the register. The next statutory post-implementation review of the PSC regulations will be carried out within the next five years.

A copy of the post-implementation review report will be laid before Parliament.

[HCWS50]

EDUCATION

Department for Education’ Key Achievements

The Secretary of State for Education (Gavin Williamson): I would like to update the House on some of the Department for Education’s key achievements since 2010.

We are helping families with the cost of childcare. The parents of over 1.4 million children are taking advantage of funded early education in 2019. This Government are committed to making childcare more affordable and more accessible, saving eligible families up to £5,000 per child every year.

We offer free childcare for three and four-year-olds. The Government offer a free universal 15 hours per week of childcare, with a free additional 15 hours for three and four-year-olds whose parents are in work, a total of 30 hours of free childcare per week for eligible working parents.

The vast majority of eligible children benefit from these entitlements. An estimated 328,200 children aged three and four were benefiting from 30 hours free childcare in the spring term of 2019. Take up of the 15 hours offer is very high, 92% of three year olds and 95% of four year olds are benefiting from free hours.

An estimated 600,000 children have benefited from a 30 hours place throughout the first two years of national delivery.

We offer free childcare for disadvantaged two-year-olds. The Government offer 15 hours of free childcare per week for the most disadvantaged families.

The vast majority of eligible children benefit from this entitlement. In the spring term of 2019, 148,800 two-year-olds from disadvantaged families benefited from 15 hours a week of funded free childcare.

Over 850,000 children have benefited from the two-year-olds entitlement since it began.

Free childcare is popular with parents of two to four-year-olds. There is 95% satisfaction among parents using the two-year-old entitlement, 91% among parents using universal hours for three to four year olds, and 95% among parents using the 30 hours entitlement on how the funded hours can be used. Three quarters of parents reported having more money to spend since they started using the 30 hours, and 80% said the quality of their family life had improved.

We plan to spend around £3.5 billion on our early education entitlements this year alone, and £3.6 billion planned for next year. We want to support early years providers in delivering high quality care and education, which is why the Chancellor recently announced funding to increase hourly rates for the Government’s free hours offers for 2020-21.

We are raising the quality and professionalism of the early years workforce by investing £20 million in high quality professional development for early years practitioners.

We are giving schools the biggest funding boost in a decade over the next three years: a total of £14 billion more, a cash increase of £2.6 billion next year, £4.8 billion and £7.1 billion in 2021-22 and 2022-23 respectively, compared to 2019-20.

We are levelling up funding across the country, so that every secondary school will receive a minimum of £5,000 per pupil in 2020-21, and every primary school will receive a minimum of £3,750 per pupil in 2020-21, rising to £4,000 by 2021-22.

This is in addition to the £1.5 billion per year we will continue to provide to fund additional pension costs for teachers over the next three years. Taken together, this means that by 2022-23 we will be providing an additional £150 million a week to our schools.
We introduced the national funding formula to distribute school funding fairly across the country, ensuring funding is based on schools’ and pupils’ needs and characteristics, not accidents of geography or history.

We are investing additional funding for 16 to 19-year olds, with increased funding of £400 million in 2020-21, the biggest injection of new money into 16 to 19-year old education in a single year since 2010. In addition, we will be allocating at least £100 million in 2020-21 to cover pension costs in the further education sector.

Our education reforms mean more children are getting a world class education at good or outstanding schools. 85% of all children are now in good or outstanding schools, up from 66% in 2010. As of March 2019 there were 1.9 million more children in good or outstanding schools than in 2010, thanks in part to our reforms.

Failing schools are turned around as sponsored academies. Over seven out of 10 inspected sponsored academies are now good or outstanding, only one in 10 were judged good or outstanding before they converted. There are over 2,300 sponsored academies.

Where schools are judged inadequate by Ofsted, we act quickly. For a maintained school, this means becoming an academy to benefit from the support of a strong sponsor. For an academy, we will transfer them to a stronger academy trust if necessary.

We are increasing support for schools that need additional help. We will be offering around 2,400 schools rated “requires improvement” by Ofsted optional support in a package worth up to £16.5 million overall.

We are making it easier for under performing schools to access school improvement support. Through the teaching school hubs test and learn phase around 2,000 schools will benefit from reforms to strengthen and improve school leadership. A competitive grant procurement is underway for teaching school hub “test-and-learn” phase, which is the first part of our plans to strengthen the current structure of system leadership.

Introducing a clearer and simpler school accountability system. This offers much greater clarity about when we will and will not intervene in a school, by removing the floor and ceiling standards, and acknowledges that Ofsted, as an independent body, is best placed to identify inadequate educational performance which requires intervention.

We are tackling teacher workload. Our wide-ranging programme of work includes publication of the workload reduction toolkit which supports school leaders, teachers and other staff to address workload issues in their school. We have published the “Making Data Work” report, and are acting on the recommendations to tackle excessive data burdens in schools.

In 2018, we announced an additional £7.7 million to support teachers to access high quality curriculum resources and reduce their workload.

The findings from the “Teacher Workload Survey 2019”, published on 11 October, suggest there has been a reduction between 2016 and 2019 in reported working hours for teachers, middle leaders and senior leaders of 5 hours a week. Whilst this is encouraging, we will continue to take action to address workload and improve work-life balance.

We are working hard to recruit and retain brilliant teachers. In January 2019 we launched the early career framework. This will underpin a fully-funded, two-year package of structured training and support for all early career teachers, linked to the best available research evidence. We recruited 34,595 teachers to start their training in 2018, over 2,600 more than in 2017-18.

We are making sure teaching is an attractive graduate profession. It is vital we ensure that the pay offer for teachers is positioned at the top of the graduate labour market, and that is why we are setting out plans to significantly raise starting pay to £30,000 by September 2022.

We are opening high performing new free schools to improve choice for parents and outcomes for children. Through the free schools programme, this Government have funded thousands of good new school places and opened schools across the country.

As of 1 October 2019 there are 507 open free schools, 48 University Technical Colleges and 24 studio schools. These will provide over 320,000 places when at capacity.

We have approved a further 227 applications from groups that are now working with to establish new free schools.

In 2019, seven of the top 15 provisional Progress 8 scores were achieved by free schools, including three of the top five, Eden Boys’ School Birmingham, Eden Girls’ School Coventry and Michaela Community School in Brent.

Free schools are disproportionately located in more deprived areas, and 18 per cent of all open free schools are dedicated to special needs or alternative provision.

We have opened two specialist Maths Free Schools, offering A-Levels in Maths, Further Maths and Physics, for young people aged 16 to 19 who wish to study mathematical subjects at university. These two schools are achieving excellent results: in 2019 King’s Maths School reported that 100% of their students achieved grades of A or A* at A-Level Maths; Exeter Maths School reported that 93% of students achieved an A or A* in their Maths A-Level. There are a further five such schools planned to open with funding secured for a total of eleven, enabling at least one maths free school to open in every region.

We are ensuring that all children are able to succeed, no matter their background. The attainment gap has narrowed between disadvantage pupils and others, as measured by the disadvantage gap index, by 13 percent at age 11 and 9 percent at age 16 since 2011.

We are supporting the most disadvantaged pupils, including those eligible for free school meals, with additional funding. The Government have spent more than £15 billion since 2011—and another £2.4 billion this year—through the pupil premium to tackle educational inequality.

We have increased funding for pupils with special educational needs. We will be investing an additional £780 million in high needs funding in 2020-21, a 12% increase on the amount available this year. This will bring the total spent on those with the most complex needs to over £7 billion.

We are getting reading off to a strong start so children have the literacy they need to succeed. In 2019, 82% of pupils met the expected standard in the phonics screening check, compared to just 58% when the check was introduced in 2012.
Improving higher technical education by establishing new institutes of technology, making it easier to upskill and gain highly skilled employment.

An institute of technology is a legally binding collaboration between further education colleges, higher education institutions and employers.

They are being created to specialise in delivering higher technical training at Levels 4 and 5—above A-Level but below degree level—primarily in STEM subjects aligned to local economic priorities.

Institutes of technology will deliver a mix of apprenticeship and classroom-based provision for industries such as digital, advanced manufacturing and engineering—industries where there are skills gaps and growing demand—in order to provide employers with the skilled workforce they need.

We are investing up to £290 million capital funding to build an institute of technology network across the country.

The first 12 institutes of technology are now starting to go live, following a comprehensive competition, and we have recently announced plans to open up to 8 more to enable them to be an institute of technology in every region of the country.

More people are benefiting from new high-quality apprenticeships. Our reforms have fundamentally changed what apprenticeships involve and the long-term opportunities they provide.

Over 1.8 million people have started an apprenticeship since May 2015.

Over 60% of starts are now on high-quality, industry-designed standards, with over 500 available.

In 2019-20 funding for apprenticeships is over £2.5 billion, double what was spent in 2010-11.

Fewer young people are not in education, employment or training. The number of 16 to 24-year-olds not in education, employment or training in the UK is down by 281,000 since 2010.

We have raised the participation age so that young people are now required to continue in education or training until at least their 18th birthday. Young people can choose to participate through full-time education, a job or volunteering combined with part-time study, or by undertaking an apprenticeship. This gives all young people the opportunity to develop skills and qualifications that will open doors to future employment, help them make the most of their potential, and earn more over their lifetime.

We are improving support for the most vulnerable children.

Adoption waiting times have come down. The average time between a child entering care and being placed with a family has reduced by seven months since 2012-13.

We are supporting families through the adoption support fund. This has provided over £130 million to local authorities and regional adoption agencies for therapeutic support to over 5,000 families.

We are supporting foster families to provide on-going support to young people leaving care. We are investing a further £10 million to expand staying put, to create stable homes for care leavers as they become adults. The programme will help more care leavers to continue living with their foster families until they reach 21. We
are providing a further £6 million in 2021-22 to roll out staying close across the country, helping young people leaving residential care to continue to get on-going support from their previous carers they know and trust.

We are helping care leavers achieve their ambitions. We launched the care leaver covenant and are spending £5 million on three social impact bonds to help care leavers into education, employment or training. We are also investing £3 million to extend the pupil premium plus to all 16 to 18-year-old care leavers, supporting their transition into further education.

We are improving support for children in care. Our innovation programme has invested £200 million in 98 projects to enable local authorities to test new approaches to supporting children in the social care system.

We are strengthening families. Building on and scaling the learning and evidence from the innovation programme by enabling up to 60 local authorities to adopt and adapt whole system and targeted projects which have successfully supported more children to stay at home thriving in stable family environments.

The Government have committed £920 million to the second phase of the troubled families programme, which aims to achieve significant and sustained improvement for up to 400,000 families in challenging circumstances.

We are improving the quality and prestige of the social care workforce. More than 2,200 high achieving graduates have been trained through fast-track programmes frontline and step up to social work. The assessed and supported year in employment has supported more than 15,000 newly qualified social workers since 2012.

[International Trade]

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

Work of the Department

The Secretary of State for International Trade (Elizabeth Truss): I would like to update the House on the work of the Department for International Trade. It has:

Supported UK exports worth over £2 trillion since June 2016. Since the Department was established, UK exports have grown from £537 billion to £654 billion—an increase of 22%.

Sustained the UK’s place as Europe’s top destination for foreign direct investment since 2003. DIT has supported 3,118 individual investments in the UK, helping to create 120,000 new jobs between April 2017 to March 2019 and attracting more projects, new jobs and investment capital than any other European country.

Helped to realise the UK’s potential as the top destination for tech innovation and talent by attracting international investment. This has resulted in the announcement of billions of pounds of investment in the UK from leading technology companies, including £1 billion from software company VMware, £1.9 billion from software company Salesforce, and £150 million from IT service management company Markley Group.

Dismantled barriers and opened up markets to British businesses across the world. This included:

Securing an agreement with China to lift its long-standing ban on exports of beef from the UK, a landmark move for British producers that was estimated by industry experts at the time of the deal to be worth £250 million in the first five years alone;

Lifting a ban on British beef and lamb exports to Japan, allowing exports which at the time were estimated by industry experts to be worth £130 million over five years;

Lifting the ban on British pork exports to Taiwan in August 2018. This has contributed to £2.1 million of UK pork being exported to Taiwan in the first half of 2019 alone.

Securing changes to public procurement rules on early childhood vaccinations in Bulgaria, supporting the UK to win a procurement worth £35 million.

Kicked off detailed technical preparations to ensure that the UK is ready to have our own independent trade policy for the first time in 46 years. This means that now:

We are ready to take our independent seat at the WTO.

We have a trade remedies investigations directorate to ensure UK businesses are safeguarded from unfair trade practices.

We have established working groups and high-level trade dialogues with key trade partners including the United States, Australia, China, the Gulf Co-operation Council, India, Japan and New Zealand. We also continue to use other instruments such as joint trade reviews with countries including China, India and Brazil.

Delivered a series of consultations on new trade agreements with the United States, Australia and New Zealand, as well as potential accession to the comprehensive and progressive agreement for Trans-Pacific Partnership. These attracted over 600,000 responses from businesses and civil society groups across the UK.

Launched a new export strategy further to raise exports to 35% as a proportion of UK GDP. This will build on the increase of exports from 27% of GDP to 30% of GDP since the Department was created. Created the Export Champion network, made up of over 1,000 export champions and advocates, to provide peer-to-peer support to businesses across the UK.

Shielded UK trade from 85% of the additional duties that would have been imposed, by securing 18 continuity trade agreements with countries that accounted for £109 billion of trade in 2018, together with our temporary tariff regime. This will ensure continuity for UK businesses however we leave the EU.1

Attracted more than 94,000 bids for international export opportunities from UK businesses via the GREAT.gov.uk platform. We launched a new export opportunities platform to match UK businesses with international opportunities. Over 285,000 export opportunities have already been published by international businesses and Governments, and GREAT.gov.uk is used by more than 36,000 registered businesses as well as around 140,000 unique visitors each month.

Provided over £7.9 billion-worth of backing for exports through UK Export Finance, supporting over 63,000 jobs since April 2017. In June 2019, UK Export Finance also announced an extensive new finance package to support the UK’s 5.7 million small and medium-sized enterprises to export into emerging markets.

1 See gov.uk for more details: https://www.gov.uk/guidance/uk-trade-agreements-with-non-eu-countries-in-a-no-deal-brexit

[HCWS51]
Prisoner Escort and Custody Services

The Minister of State, Ministry of Justice (Lucy Frazer): I am pleased to announce the Government have awarded two new contracts for the Prisoner Escort and Custody Services (PECS) Generation 4 Lot North and Lot South, to GEOAmey Ltd and Serco Ltd respectively.

This follows a competitive procedure with negotiation conducted in accordance with public sector procurement directive 2014/24/EU. GEOAmey Ltd and Serco Ltd have offered the best overall bids in terms of quality of service and cost, relative to the other bids received.

The new contracts will build upon the current service, and deliver significant improvements and efficiencies to meet the future needs of Her Majesty’s Prison and Probation Service (HMPPS), Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunal Service (HMCTS), the Youth Custody Service (YCS) and the police. Both suppliers will deliver more frequent collections from police stations and courts, with quicker collection times from courts (and return to prisons). The new service also includes a new fleet of escort vans with improved safety and security features.

The new contracts will commence on 29 August 2020 for a period of 10 years, and performance of both will be monitored through monthly contract management review meetings to ensure performance is maintained throughout the life time of the contracts and suppliers are held to account.

[HCWS48]

The Grenfell Tower Inquiry: Publication of its Phase 1 Report

The Prime Minister (Boris Johnson): This morning, Sir Martin Moore-Bick has published the phase 1 report of the independent Grenfell Tower inquiry. A copy of the report has been laid before each House of Parliament. This is a difficult day for all those who lost their loved ones, homes and possessions in that unimaginable tragedy, and found their lives devastated. Our first thoughts should be with them.

The report is a very substantial document, which includes a detailed description of the events of the night of 14 June 2017, as well as the Chair’s findings about the nature of the building, the origins of the fire, its subsequent development, the response of the London Fire Brigade and the steps taken by the other emergency services. It also contains a number of recommendations that my Government will consider with the utmost urgency. The bereaved, survivors and local residents have waited a long time for the inquiry’s report, and it is right that the report should be debated in Parliament on the day of its publication. But given the substantial nature of the report, and the limited time that parliamentarians have had to read the text, I am committed to holding a further debate at the earliest opportunity once Members have had an opportunity to properly scrutinise its contents. I hope that the bereaved and survivors can draw at least some solace from the rigorous, detailed nature of Sir Martin’s report.

[HCWS49]
Written Statements

Thursday 31 October 2019

CABINET OFFICE

Government Business: Pre-election Period

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): The Prime Minister will write to ministerial colleagues shortly providing guidance on the conduct of Government business during the pre-election period. The Cabinet Secretary will also issue guidance to civil servants on their conduct during this period. [HCWS65]

TREASURY

HMRC: Automation of Tax Notices

The Financial Secretary to the Treasury (Jesse Norman): The Government are announcing today that legislation will be brought forward in the next Finance Bill to put the meaning of the law in relation to automation of tax notices beyond doubt. Specifically, that legislation will put beyond doubt that HMRC’s use of large-scale automated processes to give certain statutory notices, and to carry out certain functions is, and always has been, fully authorised by tax administration law. This measure will have effect both prospectively and retrospectively.

The Government introduce legislation with retrospective effect only where necessary. In this case retrospective effect is necessary to close off the Exchequer and operational risks presented by judicial challenges to HMRC’s ability to automate certain functions. It will protect very substantial sums of tax and penalties already legitimately paid. It will preserve the status quo for taxpayers and HMRC, merely confirming the validity of HMRC’s longstanding and widely accepted operational practice. Taking this action will help to guarantee the integrity of the tax base, provide certainty to taxpayers, and allow the Government to continue to administer the tax system efficiently. More details will be published on the Finance Bill 2019-20 pages of gov.uk. [HCWS61]

Work of the Department

The Chancellor of the Exchequer (Sajid Javid): The fundamentals of the UK economy are strong, and the public finances have been repaired. Government action has supported the British people with the cost of living. Poverty and inequality have been reduced, ensuring everyone can benefit from the UK’s economic success. Investment has increased, promoting productivity, creating job opportunities and driving growth in the economy. Since 2010, the hard work of the British people has: reduced the deficit by four fifths; created 1,000 new jobs a day to reach near-record employment; and overseen nine consecutive years of growth. The Government’s Brexit deal will give people and businesses the certainty they need to invest.

Economy and public finances

The economy has grown 18.9% since 2010. The IMF’s latest world economic outlook forecasts the UK to grow as fast as France, and faster than Germany, Italy and Japan in 2019 and faster than all four in 2020.

The inflation rate is stable and low at 1.7%, below the Bank of England’s target of 2%.

Borrowing has been cut by over four fifths as a share of GDP since 2010, from a post-war high of 10.2% in 2009-10 to 1.9% in 2018-19, the lowest level since 2001-02.

There are 3.6 million more people in work, and the employment rate is at a near record high.

Unemployment has fallen by 1.2 million. The unemployment rate is near its lowest level for over four decades.

The proportion of low paid jobs is at its lowest since records began in 1997.

The number of unemployed 16 to 24-year-olds has fallen by 47% since 2010, and over 80% of 16 to 24-year-olds are in work or full time education.

The gender pay gap, hourly pay, excluding overtime, is at a record low of 17.3%. For full-time employees, the gap is 8.9%, near the record low.

Over 60% of the growth in employment since 2010 has been outside of London and the south east.

The Government have committed more than £2.7 billion towards city and growth deals for all parts of Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

This UK Government investment is creating jobs and driving regional economic growth across Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

Supporting the cost of living

The Government have cut income tax for 32 million people since 2015-16, saving the typical basic rate taxpayer £380 and taking 1.74 million out of income tax altogether.

Supported by the national living wage (NLW), the lowest paid saw their wages grow by 8% above inflation between April 2015 and April 2018. The NLW increased by 4.9% on 1 April to £8.21, increasing a full-time minimum wage worker’s annual pay by over £2,750 since its introduction.

Fuel duty has been frozen for nine consecutive years, so the average driver will have saved a cumulative £1,000 compared to pre-2010 plans.

The introduction of a new temporary energy price cap on default standard variable tariffs this year has protected 11 million customers from poor value energy bills.

The doubling of free childcare for eligible working parents of three and four-year-olds which will save parents who take up full entitlement up to £3,000 a year per child.

Poverty and inequality have been reduced

Real household disposable income per person is above its pre-crisis peak, and it is 11.2% higher than at the start of 2010, meaning people have more money to spend than they did in 2010.

Income inequality is lower now than it was in 2010.
The top 1% of income taxpayers pay over 29% of income tax, higher than at any time since 1999.

Since 2010 there are:
- 400,000 fewer people in absolute low income.
- 100,000 fewer pensioners in absolute low income.
- 300,000 fewer working-age adults in absolute low income.

The percentage of people in absolute poverty, after housing costs, is around its record low.

Since 2010 there are over 1 million fewer workless households, and the number of children living in workless households is down by 730,000, both record lows.

**Boosting productivity**

Since 2010 the Government have:
- Provided over half a trillion pounds in capital investment, investment in skills, and reduced taxes for businesses.
- Established the national productivity investment fund (NPIF) to deliver additional capital spending for areas critical for improving productivity across all parts of the UK. The NPIF is now set to deliver £37 billion of high-value investment to 2023-24 in economic infrastructure, R and D, and housing.
- Improved technical education by reforming apprenticeships and developing new T-levels for delivery from September 2020.
- The Government have supported business and enterprise with lower taxes:
  - The UK has the most competitive corporation tax rate in the G20 at 19%.
  - Since Budget 2016, the Government have announced reductions to business rates worth more than £13 billion over the next five years.

**Funding public services**

Spending Round 2019 (SR19) saw the fastest planned increase in departmental day to day spending for 15 years. Resource spending is now set to rise by 4.1% in real terms from 2019-20 to 2020-21.

SR19 was the first SR since 2002 where no department will face a cut in its resource Budget.

SR19 funded:
- An extra £750 million investment in policing in 2020-21 to begin delivering the Government’s commitment to recruit 20,000 additional officers by 2023, up to 6,000 officers will be in place by the end of 20-21;
- Further health investment, building on the extra funding provided last year of £33.9 billion a year by 2023-24 in cash terms, compared to 2018-19, the largest cash increase in public services since the Second World War.
- A cash increase in schools spending of £2.6 billion in 2020-21, rising to £7.1 billion in 2022-23, compared to 2019-20.
- £400 million extra to train and teach 16 to 19-year-olds to get the skills they need for well-paid jobs in the modern economy.
- To fund public services, the Government have taken unprecedented action to make sure people pay their fair share of tax. The Government have introduced over 100 measures to tackle tax avoidance, evasion and other forms of non-compliance since 2010 which, alongside HMRC's compliance work, have secured and protected an additional £200 billion in tax revenue which would otherwise have gone unpaid.

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**Work of the Department**

**The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):**

The first duty of any Government is to defend our country and to keep our people safe. The Ministry of Defence plays a pivotal role in delivering our national security objectives to protect our people, project our influence and promote our prosperity. This Government have increased the defence budget by 0.5% above inflation every year to over £41 billion by 2020-21, making us the biggest defence spender in Europe and the second biggest in NATO. The UK is the second largest defence exporter in the world, selling equipment worth £14 billion last year and supporting more than 260,000 British jobs. We are investing an extra £2.2 billion into defence over this year and next to ensure the UK’s world-class armed forces can continue to modernise, meet ever-changing threats and continue to protect the country’s national security. This includes prioritising key capabilities such as cyber, shipbuilding and the nuclear deterrent.

**Operations**

The UK armed forces are deployed around the world 24 hours a day, 365 days a year.

- In 2019 alone we have marked 50 years of continuous at sea deterrence, increased the number of armed forces personnel in Afghanistan from 650 to around 1,100, delivered over 400 bespoke training activities in the middle east and north Africa, and provided military aid to the civil authorities on over 120 occasions.

- British forces made the second largest overall contribution to the fight against Daesh after the US. We lead a 1,000 strong force (c.800 from UK plus troops from France and Denmark) to undertake NATO enhanced forward presence in Estonia, and UK Typhoon aircraft have recently completed an air policing deployment in the Baltic sea region (2019).

- We have delivered on our commitment to double the number of military personnel involved in UN peacekeeping, following deployments to Somalia and South Sudan, and increased our presence in the Gulf (Dubai), Asia-Pacific (Singapore) and west Africa (Abuja) to provide a focal point for defence activity. In 2018 we opened the first overseas navy base in 50 years in Bahrain.

In both 2017 and 2019, the UK provided military support for humanitarian and disaster relief to the Caribbean islands left devastated by natural disasters, Hurricane Irma (Op RUMAN) and Hurricane Dorian (Op BARYTONE). This year, in the Caribbean and Atlantic, the RFA have seized or disrupted 1.4 metric tonnes of cocaine and cannabis, worth over £45 million.

**People**

We are working to strengthen the support we give to our serving personnel, veterans and their families.

- More than 4,000 organisations have signed the armed forces covenant and the new office for veterans’ affairs will ensure the UK leads the world in care for armed forces veterans.

- We have launched the first ever UK-wide strategy on the delivery of support for veterans, including a new ID card for veterans, which will help them access specialist support and services.
The Flexible Working Act was passed enabling service personnel to request restricted separation and or part-time working to enable them to balance their personal commitments with Defence, helping to improve retention. We have also doubled the operational allowance for deployed military personnel and are currently investing a further £123 million, as a minimum, this financial year to improve service family accommodation in the UK.

We have made £280 million in payments to more than 18,000 applicants so far through the forces help to buy scheme and allocated over £230 million from LIBOR fines for the armed forces community.

We achieved the target of enrolling 50,000 apprentices in the MOD, 16 months ahead of the target date.

We are based across the United Kingdom, and through our industrial contracts and bases we support 10,000 jobs in Scotland and more than 6,000 in Wales.

We have met our target of cadet expansion programme of 500 cadet units parading ahead of time.

**Equipment**

We will spend £186 billion on equipment and equipment support between 2018 and 2028.

The Army have signed major equipment support contracts including a £439 million contract for Apache helicopter support and funded a demonstration phase to upgrade Warrior vehicles.

We have placed a £4.5 billion contract, including in-service support until 2024, to purchase 589 AJAX vehicles.

This month (October), UK F-35 Lightning jets landed and took off from HMS Queen Elizabeth for the first time, as part of the preparations for the carrier strike group deployment in 2021. Her sister ship, HMS Prince of Wales, is conducting sea trials and will be commissioned later this year.

In 2019 we took delivery of additional F-35B aircraft, bringing the total to 18, and placed order for more to be delivered between 2020-22. British F-35Bs completed their first operational missions this year.

We have taken delivery of our final Typhoon aircraft (taking the current fleet to 157) and have continued to grow the UKs A400M transport aircraft fleet.

This year we have announced our intent to procure five E7 airborne early warning aircraft and in recent years we have secured deals to provide nine P-8A maritime patrol aircraft and 50 Apache AH-64E aircraft through a foreign military sales agreement with the US Government.

The first steel has been cut for the second ship in the Royal Navy’s next generation of Type 26 anti-submarine frigates; the first ship, HMS Glasgow, will enter service in 2027. Australia and Canada have committed to purchase the design.

All four of the TIDE class tankers have been delivered while HMS Medway, the second of five new offshore patrol vessels, has been accepted into the fleet.

Building on the success of the RAF’s first ever satellite, Carbonite-II, we have joined the U.S. combined space operations centre in California. An RAF pilot has been seconded to Virgin Orbit.

**Industry**

The UK continues to play an ambitious and trailblazing role on the global stage, designing, developing and rapidly procuring state-of-the-art equipment that ensures our armed forces are fit for the future.

The defence industry champions British manufacturing, pushes the boundaries of technology and delivers unique export opportunities across the world to protect not just the UK, but our allies too.

As a thriving national sector with a truly global reach, the work of defence underpins the Government’s industrial and economic strategies and continues to drive British innovation on the international stage.

The DSEI exhibition showcases every two years the very best of British ingenuity, innovation and industry on the international stage, demonstrating how Global Britain continues to be a world leader in technology and defence.

Built on more than 400 years of excellence and innovation, we consistently push the possibilities to the limit, developing and exporting battle-winning capabilities that redefine the defence landscape.

We are constantly sharpening our cutting-edge capabilities, exploring and procuring the very best technology to ensure we continue to outpace adversaries for generations to come.

The UK alone injects nearly £20 billion into our national defence industry every year, almost £300 for every person in the country, making defence spending a powerhouse behind the UK economy, driving export orders and future-proofing the industry for generations to come.

We are implementing the national shipbuilding strategy to transform the procurement of naval ships, make the UK's maritime industry more competitive, grow the Royal Navy fleet by the 2030s, export British ships overseas, and boost innovation, skills, jobs, and productivity across the UK.

Built on the foundations of a thriving UK defence sector that continues to turbocharge regional economies, a consortia led by Babcock, in partnership with the Thales Group, has been selected as the preferred bidder for the Type 31 general purpose frigates procurement process reinforcing international partnerships, building security co-operation and strengthening our influence across the world.

We have invested over £40 million in developing a new cyber security operations capability.

Investing £48 million to deliver a new state of the art chemical weapons defence centre at DSTL Porton Down.

We have published the combat air strategy to strengthen the UK’s role as a global leader in the sector and to protect key skills across the UK industrial base. Team Tempest will bring together the UK’s world leading industry and sovereign capabilities across future combat air’s four key technology areas.

We have opened the £83 million state of the art defence fulfilment centre at Donnington, Shropshire, operated through the MOD’S partnership with Team Leidos to transform defence logistics.

The small and medium-sized enterprises action plan was published this year, and the defence and security accelerator has allocated over £36 million to over 200 proposals.

We have secured a £6 billion Qatari deal to purchase 24 Typhoon and nine Hawk aircraft from the UK.
As our exports orders climb, our supply chains continue to reinforce our regional economies, supporting highly skilled jobs and training apprentices to be the future of our pioneering UK defence sector.

DIGITAL, CULTURE, MEDIA AND SPORT

Strategic Priorities for Telecommunications, Radio Spectrum and Postal Services

The Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (Nicky Morgan): I wish to inform members that I have designated the Government’s statement of strategic priorities for telecommunications, the management of radio spectrum, and postal services, for the purposes of section 2A of the Communications Act 2003.

The statement sets out the Government’s strategic priorities and desired outcomes in a number of areas, including the deployment of nationwide gigabit-capable broadband as soon as possible, high-quality mobile coverage where people live, work and travel, the paramount importance of the security and resilience of telecoms networks, and furthering the interests of telecoms consumers.

The statement was laid before Parliament on 18 July 2019 and the statutory period required under section 2C of the Act has now ended. Ofcom is required to have regard to the statement when carrying out its relevant functions and must explain in writing what it proposes to do in consequence of the statement within 40 days, in accordance with section 2B of the Act. Ofcom is thereafter required to publish annual reviews of what it has done in consequence of the statement.

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Work of the Department

The Secretary of State for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs (Theresa Villiers): DEFRA has wide and hugely important objectives: to protect and enhance our natural environment, to lead the world in food, farming and fisheries, to deliver a safe and ambitious departure from the EU, and to be an outstanding organisation. This means we play a major role in people’s day-to-day lives, from the food we eat to the air we breathe, and the water we drink.

I would like to update the House on some of DEFRA’s key domestic achievements since 2010, which have been delivered whilst maintaining the highest standards of preparedness for EU Exit.

On the natural environment, we have:

- Produced a 25-year environment plan setting out how the Government will achieve the aim of being the first generation to leave the environment in a better state than we found it. In 2019 we published the first 25-year environment plan progress report with 90% of the plan’s actions delivered or being progressed.
- Introduced the first Environment Bill in 20 years, setting out a domestic framework for environmental governance and legally binding long term targets as the UK leaves the European Union. This is a vital step towards delivering the 25-year environment plan.
- Improved or created 16,000 acres of water dependent habitat, creating 2,700 acres of intertidal habitat and improving 380 miles of river habitats.
- Published Julian Glover’s “Landscapes Review of National Parks and Areas of Outstanding Natural Beauty”, setting out how we can fulfil the vision for our finest landscapes to be places of natural beauty.
- Announced £60 million to help plant new woodlands and urban trees to help meet the Government target to plant 11 million rural trees and 1 million urban trees by 2022, announced the creation of a Northern Forest and Northumberland Forest, and appointed a tree champion to drive tree planting rates.
- Trees are an important carbon sink for the UK as we aim to meet our target of net zero greenhouse gas emissions by 2050, with the UK the first major economy to legislate for this in July 2019. We have made a strong start, planting over 16 million trees since 2010.
We have cleaned up the air: since 2010 toxic emissions of nitrogen oxides are down 29%, sulphur dioxide emissions are down 62%, and fine particulate matter emissions are down 10%.

Announced funding for the restoration of 6,498 hectares of degraded peatland, much of this in the uplands, allocating £10 million to 62 sites across England. Peatlands are the UK's largest terrestrial carbon store.

Designated the third tranche of 41 new marine conservation zones, marking the most significant expansion of England’s “blue belt” of protected areas to date and protecting UK waters.

Committed to protect 30% of the world’s oceans by 2030 and created a global alliance with 10 countries signing up to the UK-led initiative to protect at least 30% of the world’s ocean and its wildlife.

Launched a review into highly protected marine areas, sea life, and marine habitats as well as publishing an updated marine strategy showing progress towards good environmental status.

Launched the clean air strategy which the World Health Organisation praised as “an example for the rest of the world to follow”. It will tackle all sources of air pollution, making our air healthier to breathe, protecting nature and boosting the economy.

Implemented a ban on plastic straws, stirrers and cotton buds from April 2020, to reduce plastic waste, and led a Commonwealth clean oceans alliance with half of the Commonwealth to tackle marine plastics.

In 2018 we introduced a microbeads ban to prevent these harmful pieces of plastic entering the marine environment.

Launched and published responses to consultations on the reform of the waste system, including on extended producer responsibility for packaging, a deposit-return scheme for drinks containers, consistency in recycling, and tax on plastic packaging containing less than 30% recycled content.

Committed to reintroducing formerly native species, including iconic species such as the white-tailed eagle and beavers, where there are clear environmental and socio-economic benefits.

On food, farming and fisheries, including improving animal and plant health, we have:

We are replacing the restrictive rules of the EU’s common agricultural policy, freeing farmers to seize the opportunities offered by Brexit. Instead we are introducing an ambitious new environmental land management scheme which will allow us to reward the farmers and land managers who protect our environment.

Protected allergy sufferers through “Natasha’s Law”, requiring food businesses to include full ingredients labelling on pre-packed for direct sale.

Protected service animals through “Finn’s Law”, which makes it an offence to cause unnecessary suffering to service animals.

Introduced “Lucy’s Law” ensuring that puppies and kittens are born and reared in a safe environment, with their mother, and sold from their place of birth.

Delivered the Ivory Act 2018, introducing one of the world’s strongest bans on ivory to prevent commercial activities involving ivory in the UK that could directly or indirectly fuel the poaching of elephants. We have also launched a call for evidence on extending a ban to a range of animals including hippopotamus, walruses and narwhals, and are consulting on banning imports from trophy hunting of endangered species.

Commissioned the bovine tuberculosis strategy review, published in 2018, on the Department’s strategy for achieving officially bovine tuberculosis free status in England by 2038.

Created a stronger future for farming with new markets for British farming products opening across the world. Markets for British beef and lamb worth £127 million over five years have been opened in Japan and in 2018, China lifted the ban on British beef worth £250 million in the first five years, which had been in place since 1996. A deal has also been secured to enable UK exports of seed potatoes to China; the seed potato export market as a whole is worth an annual £90 million to the UK.

Published the “Sustainable Fisheries for Future Generations” White Paper as part of our goal to promote a more competitive, profitable and sustainable fishing industry across the whole of the UK, and setting a gold standard for sustainable fishing around the world in addition to announcing £37.2 million of extra funding to boost the UK fishing industry.

We have also carried out our duties on domestic emergencies, including leading the response following the Salisbury attack. We are investing £2.6 billion in protecting people against flooding. This will fund over 1,000 flood defence schemes with 300,000 homes better protected, and improve protection to 690,000 acres of agricultural land, 279 miles of railway and over 5,000 miles of highways by 2021. Additionally, between 2015 and 2020 we will be spending over £1 billion on the maintenance of flood defence assets. This is a real terms increase in spending compared to the £812 million spent in the previous five years.

DEFRA will continue to pursue this ambitious agenda over the coming months and years, making further progress both domestically and through seizing the opportunities that leaving the EU will present.

[HCWS63]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Hong Kong: Six-monthly Report

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab): The latest six-monthly report on the implementation of the Sino-British joint declaration on Hong Kong was published today, and is attached. It covers the period from 1 January to 30 June 2019. The report has been placed in the Library of the House. A copy is also available on the Foreign and Commonwealth Office website (www.gov.uk/government/organisations/foreign-commonwealth-office). I commend the report to the House.

The report can be viewed online at: http://www.parliament.uk/business/publications/written-questions-answers-statements/written-statement/Commons/2019-10-31/HCWS53/.

[HCWS53]
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Personal Health Budgets: Legal Rights

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): Today, and following consultation, I am pleased to announce that I am laying legislation that will extend the legal right to have a personal health budget to a further two groups. These groups are:

- People eligible for section 117 aftercare services; and
- People who access wheelchair services, whose posture and mobility needs impact their wider health and social care needs.

The evidence base for personalised care demonstrates a positive impact on people, professionals and the system. It is shown to produce better outcomes and experiences, improving individual’s quality of life, whilst reducing health inequalities. It has also demonstrated the ability to reduce pressures on the system—people who are more confident and able to manage their health conditions have 18% fewer GP contacts, and 38% fewer emergency admissions than people with the least confidence.

That is why the provision of personalised care was a central component of the NHS long-term plan, with the intention of making personalised care, business as usual. This means reaching 2.5 million people by 2023-24, doubling that within the decade.

Significant progress has already been made. Over 70,000 people now have a personal health budget; nearly a 300% increase compared to the same time two-years ago. “Universal Personalised Care” has also recently been published, setting out the 21 actions that together we will take in the coming years. It can be found at: [www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/universal-personalised-care.pdf](http://www.england.nhs.uk/wp-content/uploads/2019/01/universal-personalised-care.pdf)

Personal health budgets are integral to delivering personalised care, and this extension marks an important step in delivering our ambition. We will continue to explore the feasibility of further extension and consult in due course.

Timing

The consultation on extending the right to have a personal health budget was concluded on 8 June 2018 and the consultation response published on 21 February 2019. The changes to the regulations are being made at the earliest opportunity to bring about these positive impacts as soon as possible, and will come into force on 2 December, rather than awaiting a common commencement date.

HOME DEPARTMENT

G6 Munich

The Minister for Security (Brandon Lewis): My noble Friend the Minister of State, Home Office (Baroness Williams of Trafford) has today made the following written statement:

The informal G6 group of Interior Ministers held its most recent meeting in Munich on 28 and 29 October 2019. Representatives from the USA, the European Commission, Interpol and the World Jewish Congress also attended the meeting.

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Victoria Atkins): The Government have today laid before Parliament and published the third annual report on the United Kingdom’s progress toward the ratification of the Council of Europe convention
on combating violence against women and domestic violence, the “Istanbul convention”. The UK signed the Istanbul convention in 2012 to signal the UK’s strong commitment to tackling violence against women and girls (VAWG) and this Government remain committed to ratifying it.

The report sets out the steps taken by the UK Government and the devolved Administrations toward ratification of the convention and the work that has been undertaken since the 2018 report on progress.

This year, we have continued to strengthen our efforts to combat VAWG. We have published a refreshed cross-Government VAWG strategy to ensure that we are doing all that we can to tackle crimes which affect disproportionately women and girls. The refresh captures new programmes of work and sets out 54 new actions the Government have committed to take to drive forward this agenda, including the establishment of an end-to-end review into the criminal justice response to rape.

In most respects, the UK already complies with or goes further than the convention requires. Since signing the convention in 2012, we have significantly strengthened our laws and introduced a range of new tools and measures to protect victims. But we know that there is more to do. That is why in July this year we introduced a landmark Domestic Abuse Bill 2019 in Parliament, which followed a public consultation that attracted more than 3,200 responses. The Bill set out a package of measures to transform our response to domestic abuse.

The Domestic Abuse Bill 2019 included the necessary legislative measures to ensure that the criminal law in England and Wales, Scotland and Northern Ireland satisfied the requirements of Article 44 of the convention in respect of extra-territorial jurisdiction; the provisions in respect of Scotland and Northern Ireland were included at the request of the Scottish Government and Department of Justice. In addition, and again following a request earlier this year from the Department of Justice in Northern Ireland, the Bill also included a new domestic abuse offence for Northern Ireland which would enable Northern Ireland to be fully compliant with Article 33, psychological violence. After the report went to print yesterday the Early Parliamentary General Election Bill completed its passage through Parliament, which means that the Domestic Abuse Bill will not continue in this Parliament. It remains the case that the drawing up of the legislation represents an important milestone in our progress towards compliance with Articles 44 and in Northern Ireland 33. The Government remain fully committed to ratifying the convention and to taking the measures necessary to enable us to do so.

The issue of support for migrant victims of domestic abuse was raised by the Joint Committee on the Draft Domestic Abuse Bill in its report published in June this year. In response, the Government have committed to reviewing the overall response to migrant victims of domestic abuse, including by specifically considering the Committee’s recommendation to extend the period of time that support is offered for and how this relates to a victim’s ability to access refuge accommodation. As part of this review, we will also take into account any obligations we have under the Istanbul convention. We have therefore recorded Articles 4(3)—to the extent that it relates to migrant and refugee status—and 59 as “under review” in the report this year to reflect that we are currently considering the Committee’s concerns in greater detail.

The publication of this report fulfils the requirement of section 2 of the Preventing and Combating Violence Against Women and Domestic Violence (Ratification of Convention) Act 2017. I will lay before Parliament the report required by section 1 of that Act when our timescale for ratification is clear.

Copies of the report will be available in the Vote Office and it will be published on the Government’s website at gov.uk.

[HCWS58]

HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT

Leasehold and Commonhold Reform

The Minister for Housing (Ms Esther McVey): During the leasehold and commonhold reform Westminster Hall debate on 2 October, I pledged to set out in full the actions the Government are taking on leasehold and commonhold reform. [Column 366WH]

The Government are taking forward a comprehensive reform of leasehold and commonhold, so it is fairer for homeowners. We responded on 27 June 2019 to the technical consultation on leasehold reform which set out how our plans will work in practice. We will legislate to ensure that, in future, apart from in exceptional circumstances, all new houses will be sold on a freehold basis. We will also reduce ground rent to zero on new leases and will improve how leasehold properties are bought and sold by setting fixed time frames and maximum fees for the provision of leasehold information. We will implement these changes when parliamentary time allows.

We are also working with the Law Commission to:

- standardise the enfranchisement process, so that buying a freehold or extending a lease can be made easier, quicker and more cost-effective.
- review how commonhold works, so that it is a viable alternative to leasehold for both existing and new homes.
- make it easier for leaseholders to obtain the right to manage, in both straightforward and complex developments.

The Law Commission will report back to Government on options to reform the valuation process this autumn, and on all three projects in February 2020.

In March 2019, we launched an industry pledge which commits freeholders to identifying any lease with ground rent terms that double more frequently than every 20 years and contacting leaseholders to offer to amend the terms. The pledge has been signed by more than 60 leading developers, freeholders and managing agents. We will continue to monitor its effectiveness and take further action as necessary.

The Competition and Markets Authority (CMA) announced in June 2019 that it will carry out an investigation into the mis-selling of leasehold properties. The CMA will use its consumer protection powers to determine whether leasehold terms—including onerous ground rents and permission fees—can be classified as “unfair”.

During
If the evidence merits it, the CMA will consider whether to bring forward enforcement proceedings. We look forward to receiving the outcome of this work.

We have also:

- made it easier for leaseholders to form recognised tenants’ associations (RTAs). We will shortly be reviewing this legislation to see how effectively it is working in practice;
- worked with trading standards to improve information on accessing redress through the publishing of new guidance, which will help current leaseholders understand the redress process better;
- committed to implement most of the Law Commission recommendations in its 2017 “Event Fees in Retirement Properties” report. We will consider two recommendations (on succession rights and a database of leasehold retirement properties with event fees) further to determine the most effective way of improving the system for consumers;
- asked the Law Commission to update its 2006 report, “Termination of Tenancies for Tenant Default”, so that we can consider next steps on the law of forfeiture;
- committed to introducing legislation to extend mandatory membership of a redress scheme to all freeholders of leasehold properties;
- set out our intention to give freehold homeowners the same rights as leaseholders to challenge the reasonableness of estate maintenance fees, and to apply to the tribunal to appoint a new manager;
- committed to ensuring homeowners cannot be subject to a mandatory possession order for minor ground rent or rentcharge arrears;
- announced in March 2019 that we will address the issue of legal costs. We believe leaseholders should not be subject to unjustified legal costs and will close the legal loopholes that allow this to happen;

We have also committed to regulating managing agents and to improving the transparency and fairness of service charges. This includes introducing a single mandatory and legally enforceable code of practice to set standards across the sector and requiring agents to be qualified to practice.

Last October, we established an independent working group, chaired by Lord Best, to take this work forward. They looked at how standards can be raised across the property sector and how fees such as service charges should be presented to consumers. The working group published its final report to the Government in July 2019, and we are considering its recommendations and will announce the next steps in due course.

**JUSTICE**

**Work of the Ministry**

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): I am pleased to be able to update the House on the Government’s significant achievements in modernising the justice system over the past 10 years.

We have supported the prison system and created decent and safe prisons by undertaking the following actions:

Since 2010 we have removed almost 50,000 foreign national offenders (FNOs) from our prisons, immigration removal centres and the community, and agreed new prisoner transfer agreements with countries around the world to allow FNOs to serve their prison sentences in their own country, including Albania and Pakistan.

In January 2017, we launched a campaign to recruit 2,500 additional prison officers by December 2018 to ensure the safe running of our prisons. We achieved this target six months early.

In 2018-19 £70 million was invested in prison safety, security and decency.

From April 2018, we have been testing and evaluating innovative approaches to helping prisoners recover from drug addiction through our £9 million drug recovery prison pilot at HMP Holme House. This is a joint project between MoJ and the Department of Health and Social Care/NHS England.

In April 2019, we released the national prison drug strategy together with guidance, and introduced innovative programmes such as incentivised substance free living.

The recent 10 Prisons Project saw an overall 16% reduction in the rate of assaults and a 50% reduction in total positive drug tests.

We are making a £100 million investment in prison security to tackle the drugs, weapons and mobile phones that increase the risk to officers and hinder rehabilitation.

We have ensured that the sentences handed down by the courts are fair by introducing the following measures:

- In 2012, the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders (LASPO) Act abolished the imprisonment for public protection (IPP) sentence and introduced extended determinate sentences for dangerous offenders. Since 2016, implementation of measures contained in a comprehensive IPP action plan in 2016 has seen a dramatic reduction in the IPP prison population since abolition of the sentence.

That same year (2012) we also consolidated previous release legislation (contained in 1967 and 1991 legislation) into the Criminal Justice Act 2003, thereby making the sentencing and release framework less complex and confusing.

In 2015, the Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2014 was brought into force. This strengthened the extended determinate sentence (EDS) by providing that in all cases where such a sentence was imposed the prisoner could be held until the end of the term, with the possibility of Parole Board release from the two-thirds point (previously, some EDS prisoners were released automatically at the two-thirds point).

In July 2019, we implemented new Parole Board rules. This included the introduction of a new reconsideration mechanism to make it easier to challenge parole decisions which appear seriously flawed. This built on the rule changes enacted previously in 2018 which abolished the prohibition on disclosure of information and enabled the Parole Board to issue summaries of its decisions to victims and others who requested one.

In October 2019 we laid legislation to ensure that serious violent and sexual offenders spend a greater proportion of their sentence in custody.

We have also this month laid legislation to implement 2012 legislation to introduce alcohol abstinence and monitoring requirements as a sentencing option.
This month we have also introduced the Prisoners (Disclosure of Information about Victims) Bill, responding to the Helen’s Law campaign, which will ensure that cases where prisoners do not disclose the location of victims’ remains or the identity of children in indecent photographs are fully considered by the Parole Board when considering the release of such a prisoner.

We have improved support for the victims of crime by introducing the following measures:

In 2010, the first Victims’ Commissioner for England and Wales was appointed. Their role is to promote the interests of victims and witnesses and encourage good practice in their treatment.

In 2011, we implemented the Prisoners’ Earnings Act which allows a levy to be imposed on prisoners’ earnings when they are undertaking paid work in the community. This helps raise £1 million plus each year to support victims.

In 2012, we launched a consultation on “Getting it right for victims and witnesses”, setting out the Government’s proposed approach to ensuring that victims and witnesses get the support they need.

In 2012, the EU directive for victims of crime 2012/29/EU was passed. This requires all EU countries to establish minimum standards on the rights, support and protection of victims of crime. The UK fulfils these obligations through the code of practice for victims of crime (victims’ code). In 2015, the victims code was revised to full transpose rights within the EU victims directive.

In 2013-14, Police and Crime Commissioners were allocated local funding to commission emotional and practical support services for victims of crime in their area.

In 2014, the Government established the victims panel, to represent the voice of victims in Government policy making.

In 2018, the victims strategy was published, providing a national, cross-Government framework to make fundamental improvements for victims.

In 2019, we published a consultation on amendments to the victims code.

We have modernised the justice system by introducing the following reforms:

In 2012, we created new offences of causing serious injury by dangerous driving and squatting in a residential building.

In 2015, we criminalised sexual communication with a child and made it a crime to possess a “paedophile manual” (Serious Crime Act 2015).

We also tackled female genital mutilation (FGM) by extending extra-territorial jurisdiction (tackling crimes committed overseas), providing anonymity for victims, introducing a new crime of failure to protect a girl under 16 and introducing new FGM Protection Orders (Serious Crime Act 2015).

That same year we also strengthened the law on grooming and made revenge porn a crime (Criminal Justice and Courts Act 2015).

In 2016 we introduced public hearings to the Court of Protection increasing transparency around the Court’s work.

In 2016, the Government commissioned the right hon. Member for Tottenham (Mr Lammy) to conduct an independent review into the experience of and outcomes for black, Asian and minority ethnic (BAME) people in the criminal justice system. In December 2017, MoJ confirmed its commitment to make progress on all the recommendations in some way.

Since October 2017, we have been working with health partners on a community sentence treatment requirement (CSTR) protocol which aims to increase the number of community sentences with mental health, drug and alcohol treatment requirements attached.

The Assaults on Emergency Workers (Offences) Act 2018 created a new offence and raised penalties for assaults on emergency workers, including police and prison officers.

In June 2018, MoJ published a female offender strategy, which set out our vision and plan for reducing women’s offending by taking a gender-informed approach to improve outcomes for female offenders at all points of the justice system.

In April 2019 we introduced new legislation to reform divorce law, removing the need for divorcing couples to blame each other for the breakdown of their marriage.

In February 2019, MoJ brought in a new law to ban “upskirting” following engagement with campaigner Gina Martin.

In June 2019, the Government scrapped the “same roof rule” that made some victims ineligible for compensation through the criminal injuries compensation scheme.

In July 2019 we introduced the landmark Domestic Abuse Bill to increase protections for victims of domestic abuse and prevent victims being cross-examined by their abusers.

We have modernised the prison estate:

Since 2010 we have opened 8,397 places via four new prisons: Isis, Thameside, Oakwood and Berwyn, totalling 5,734 places.

Alongside new prisons we have built 11 new house blocks at existing sites: Elmley, Nottingham, Parc (x2), Buckley Hall, Moorland, Bure, Peterborough, The Mount, Thameside, and Stocken, totalling 2,663 places.

In the same period, we have closed a total of 7,295 places via: 20 prison closures (6,530 places) at Ashwell, Lancaster Castle, Latchmere House, Wellingborough, Bullwood Hall, Canterbury, Gloucester, Shrewsbury, Kingston, Shepton Mallet, Dorchester, Northallerton, Reading, Blundeston, Blantyre House, Haslar, Dover, Holloway, Kennet, and Glen Parva; and two partial closures (765 places).

In 2019 the Prime Minister announced an additional £2.5 billion to provide an additional 10,000 prison places; the first of which will be built at Full Sutton. This is in addition to new prisons already planned at Wellingborough, which is in progress, and Glen Parva, which we expect to start building next year.

We have made improvements to probation services:

Since 2010, we have extended probation supervision to more than 40,000 prisoners serving short sentences, who previously left prison with no statutory supervision.

In 2019, we announced plans to strengthen probation services by bringing the supervision of all offenders under the National Probation Service while ensuring a significant role for the voluntary and private sectors in the delivery of interventions.
MoJ has made available £280 million for voluntary and private sectors to deliver innovative rehabilitation services. The new probation structure will convene services from other Government Departments to support offenders, and improve the skills of the probation workforce, and the estate.

We have made considerable improvements to rehabilitation in prison, including:

- We published our education and employment strategy in May 2018, which set out how we will transform our approach to ensure prisoners develop the skills they need to secure employment on release.
- We have introduced reforms to the disclosure of criminal records to prospective employers to help get ex-offenders into employment, which makes reoffending less likely.

In May 2019, we made changes to release on temporary licence policy to improve opportunities for work and resettlement while in prison.

Through the Government’s rough sleeping strategy, we are investing up to £6.4 million in a pilot scheme to support individuals released from three prisons: Bristol, Leeds and Pentonville.

We have made reforms to the way legal aid and legal support are provided:

In 2010, the coalition Government committed to carrying out a “fundamental review of legal aid”, in order to contribute towards reducing the deficit. This led to two major transformation programmes (the legal aid reform programme and the legal aid transformation programme) which included the introduction of the Legal Aid, Sentencing and Punishment of Offenders Act 2012 (LASPO). As a result of this, between 2010-11 and 2018-19 legal aid spending fell by £945 million in real terms, or 36%, whilst ensuring those in need of support could access it.

Since the passage of LASPO, MoJ has also delivered a series of legislative changes to ensure those in need of legal aid can access it, including victims of the Grenfell disaster, offenders in prison, and most recently separated migrant children in immigration cases.

Alongside a post-implementation review of the legal aid changes made by and since LASPO, in February 2019 MoJ published a legal support action plan which announced a range of initiatives that aim to help people resolve their legal problems earlier, including a new legal support innovation fund. We also announced a comprehensive review of the legal aid means tests to ensure that legal aid is available to those who need it and have recently announced a consultation on the housing possession court duty scheme which will ensure anyone at risk of losing their home has access to the legal help they need.

Following reforms to the fee schemes for advocates in the Crown Court in 2017 and 2018, the MoJ has also announced a comprehensive review of criminal legal aid with the aim of creating a modern, resilient and sustainable criminal legal aid market, with a diverse workforce.

We have made reforms to the way in which Her Majesty’s Courts and Tribunals Service operates:

In 2016, the Lord Chancellor and senior judges set out their vision for the £1.2 billion HMCTS reform programme, to modernise the courts and tribunals system and reduce complexity in processes.

Four new online services have been delivered to the public covering divorce, probate, civil money claims and social security appeals and have been used by over 250,000 people with user satisfaction rates over 80%.

We have begun using the common platform in the magistrates courts, which in time will deliver a single online system enabling the police, the CPS, HMCTS and legal professionals to access and share all relevant information about a case.

We used to reject 40% of paper divorce applications because they were incorrectly filled in. The new online service has received over 65,000 applications and the rejection rate has dropped to under 1%.

Two courts and tribunal service centres (CTSCs) have been opened in Birmingham and Stoke-on-Trent with a third due to open in Loughborough in 2020. CTSCs are transforming the way we deliver justice services and manage cases by providing a centralised, national service for all users.

Wi-fi has been installed in all of our courts and tribunals, and more than 80,000 professionals are accessing wi-fi in our courts each week.

We have closed underused, dilapidated court buildings, raising £125 million to invest more effectively in improving our justice system.

A new system for summary offences has handled over 68,000 Transport for London and TV licensing cases, cutting delays and inefficiency.

We have supported the UK’s world-renowned legal services sector:

- We have launched the “Legal Services are GREAT” international marketing campaign in 2017. This promotes the UK’s legal sector overseas, worth around £25 billion to the UK economy, to win business for our law firms, chambers and professional bodies.
- Since its launch in Singapore in 2017, the campaign has featured in 30 countries worldwide, with trade missions to Kazakhstan, China, Chile and Nigeria.

**TRANSPORT**

**Work of the Department**

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps):

Transport plays a critical part in all our lives and is central to some of the biggest issues the country faces, including decarbonisation, growing our economy and uniting the country. I would like to update the House on key recent achievements by the Department for Transport.

**Rail**

- Launched the Williams Rail Review in September 2018 to look at the structure of the whole rail industry, including increasing integration between track and train, regional partnerships, and improving value for money for users and taxpayers.

- Invested record levels in the railway between 2014 and 2019, with over £40 billion being spent on enhancing, renewing, and maintaining the network. £15 billion of this was spent on enhancing the railway. This included:

  - Capacity enhancement projects such as additional platforms, for example at Liverpool Lime Street and Manchester airport stations; and rail line capacity upgrades, such as re-signalling between Plymouth and Penzance, and four-tracking on the Filton Bank in Bristol.
Completing major infrastructure upgrades as part of the Thameslink programme in December 2018, creating 24 train paths per hour between Blackfriars and St Pancras, including readiness for digital signalling and automatic trains.

Opening new routes such as the reinstatement of the Halton curve, which enables passenger services from north Wales and West Cheshire to directly access Liverpool City Centre and airport for the first time in more than 40 years.

Electrification of the Great Western Mainline between London and Cardiff, due to be completed early in 2020.

Over 4,300 additional rail services per week have been introduced since May 2018.

Confirmed £47.9 billion is available for the railway between 2019 and 2024. This spending will be targeted on operations, maintenance and renewals to deliver a modern, reliable service for passengers across the network.

£450 million committed to digital rail as part of the national productivity investment fund at Autumn statement 2016.

Rail fares

Cancelled above-inflation (RPI) rail fare rises every year since 2014.

Introduced the new 26 to 30 Rail Card in January 2019, allowing 4.5 million young people to travel by train for less, and launched the new 16 and 17 Railcard which from September 2019 will give up to 1.2 million young people a guaranteed 50% discount on rail travel.

Introduced the “Delay Repay 15” scheme in 2016 which allows passengers to claim compensation when trains are more than 15 minutes late.

Over 8,000 new railway carriages have been ordered since 2010.

More than 80% of passenger rail vehicles by summer 2019 now have on-train wi-fi available.

We have committed to Northern Powerhouse Rail and are working with Transport for the North on proposals to improve the rail network across the north.

In August 2019, launched an independent review into HS2 to advise the Government on whether and how to proceed with the project. The review is ongoing.

Regional and devolution

Through the Cities and Local Government Devolution Act 2017, created new powers to put sub-national transport bodies (STBs) on a statutory footing. Transport for the north’s status was enshrined in law in April 2018.

As part of the Northern Powerhouse:

Established Transport for the North, bringing together northern transport authorities with the task of working with Government to create the first ever comprehensive transport strategy for the region, covering roads, rail, freight, airports and smart ticketing.

Committed record investment of over £13 billion in the strategic roads, local roads and rail infrastructure of the north between 2015 and 2020.

Local transport

Established a new £2.5 billion transforming cities fund, with funding announced at autumn budgets in 2017 and in 2018. Allocated £1.08 billion of the transforming cities fund to the six mayoral combined authorities. £1.3 billion is being made available competitively to 12 shortlisted cities. Initial funding for “quick win” transport projects in the initial shortlisted cities was allocated in March 2019.

Announced in September 2019 that 14 major road network and large local major schemes will go forward for further development. These included the Tyne Bridge and central motorway renewal and the A140 Long Stratton Bypass in Norfolk. On 18 October the York outer ring road became the first MRN scheme to be granted programme entry.

Around £1.7 billion has been awarded so far for 13 schemes through 2018 and 2019 from MHCLG’s housing infrastructure fund. These include delivery of significant new transport infrastructure, with £102 million towards delivering the Carlisle Southern Link Road, and £218 million towards a bypass and new bridges for the Didcot Garden Village.

In December 2018, published the results of a consultation on the creation of the major road network, which brought over 5,000 miles of local authority A roads into scope for new funding from the national roads fund.

Between 2011 and 2019, approved 74 major local transport schemes with over £2.3 billion of funding such as the extension of Nottingham Tram, Heysham to M6 Link Road and the A43 Corby bypass; and the Preston Western Distributor Road.

Played a key part in the setting up of the local growth fund, and made a contribution of over £7 billion to the £12 billion total, which devolved real spending decisions to local enterprise partnerships and prioritised over 500 transport schemes through growth deals in three funding rounds in 2014, 2015 and 2017.

Allocated a record level of funding of over £6.6 billion to local authorities for local road maintenance in the period 2015-21, including a dedicated pothole action fund.

Buses

Launched the “Better deal for bus users” in September 2019, a £220 million package to boost bus services. This includes trialling a new “superbus” network approach to deliver low fares, high frequency services in Cornwall, expanding our fleet of low emission buses with an all-electric bus town, funding to enable local authorities to improve current bus services or to restore lost services, and investment in bus priority measures in the West Midlands.

Committed £48 million to fund 263 zero emission buses in 2019.

Supported local authority spending of around £1 billion per year on concessionary bus travel, enabling older and disabled people to make free off-peak bus journeys and helping them stay more connected to their communities and social surroundings.

Cycling

Government spending on cycling and walking has increased to around £2 billion over the 2016/17-2020/21 spending review period.

Invested over £40 million in the cycle rail programme since 2012 which has tripled the number of cycle parking spaces at over 500 stations, bringing the total to over 80,000.

Invested £22 million in 33 new and upgraded cycle routes on the national cycle network this year.
Launched a £2 million e-cargo bike grant programme in February 2019 to support the uptake of e-cargo bikes.

Announced a further £13 million in the Bike-ability training for school children in October 2018, to extend the scheme into 2020-21. In the year up to April 2019, around 400,000 children completed the scheme.

Secured funding through the cycle city ambition programme to improve cycling infrastructure in eight cities to get more people cycling by improving and expanding cycle routes between the city centres, local communities, and key employment and retail sites.

Published the first ever statutory cycling and walking investment strategy in April 2017.

**Strategic roads and safety**

Made good progress in delivering the first road investment strategy. At the end of the fourth year of the strategy, in March 2019, Highways England had started work on 28 schemes, in addition to the 16 schemes where works were ongoing at the start of the strategy; opened 29 schemes for traffic; and had 15 schemes in construction.

Ended tolls on the Severn Crossing in December 2018.

Announced that a second roads investment strategy will start in April 2020 with a record funding allocation of £25.3 billion from the national roads fund.

Produced a refreshed road safety statement in 2019 with a two-year action plan for four priority road user groups; young road users, rural road users, motorcyclists, and older vulnerable road users.

Strengthened drink-drive enforcement by removing—Deregulation Act 2015—the automatic right for drivers who fail a breathalyser test to demand a blood and urine test—“statutory option”—removing the opportunity to sober up while waiting for the test to be taken.

Provided £100 million of funding for the “safer roads fund” to improve the safety of 50 of England’s most dangerous local A roads.

**Motoring and the environment**

Launched the road to zero in 2018, our strategy on the transition to zero emission road transport, including that all new cars and vans will be effectively zero-emission by 2040.

Launched a new £400 million electric vehicle charging infrastructure investment fund, the first £70 million of which was allocated in September 2019 for 3000 rapid charge points, more than doubling the number across the UK to 5000.

Published the Clean Air Strategy 2019, which is the most ambitious air quality strategy in a generation, aiming to halve the harm to human health from air pollution in the UK by 2030.

We are investing in one of the most comprehensive global programmes of support for ultralow emission vehicles, including grants for vehicles and charge point infrastructure;

Since 2011, the plug-in car grant has supported the sale of over 170,000 vehicles ultralow-emission cars in the UK by Q2 2019, up from 111 in 2010, based on cars eligible for plug-in car grant support; including those cars not eligible for grant, there are currently 210,000 licensed ULEVs in total.

The electric vehicles home-charge scheme (EVHS) has supported over 120,000 charge points being installed in homes to date. All chargers installed using this grant must be smart from July 2019.

Invested £20 million to deliver new, dedicated charge points for electric taxis in local areas, with funding awarded to 27 local authorities in 2017 and 2019.

Hosted the world’s first international zero-emission vehicle summit in September 2018.

**Tackling poor air quality**

Published the 2017 NO\textsubscript{2} plan and its 2018 supplement, which has led to 61 local authorities being required to assess what action is needed to address the exceedances.

Committed £495 million as part of the Government commitment to improving transport and tackling air quality, which has now increased to £572 million technology and innovation.

Committed £250 million to help position the UK as a global leader in the development and deployment of connected and self-driving vehicles, and have launched 90 projects as of summer 2019, involving over 200 organisations.

Created the centre for connected and autonomous vehicles (CCAV) in 2015 to help position the UK as a global leader in the development and deployment of connected and self-driving vehicles.

Passed the Automated and Electric Vehicles Act (2018) through Parliament to enable drivers of automated cars to be insured on UK roads, and are working with the Law Commission on exploring regulations for self-driving vehicles.

Launched the future of mobility urban strategy in 2019 which set out nine principles to guide the UK’s approach to emerging mobility technologies and services, as well as actions for regulatory reviews of further areas such as e-scooters.

**Accessibility**

In August 2019 the eligibility for disabled parking badges—blue badges—was expanded to include those with non-visible disabilities or conditions, where these severely affect an individual’s mobility.

Following improvements to the gov.uk service, the percentage of blue badge applications submitted online has increased substantially, with 61.2% online in October 2019.

Launched the inclusive transport strategy in 2018, to create a transport system that provides equal access for disabled people by 2030, with assistance if physical infrastructure remains a barrier.

Progress has been made, for example by mid-2019, 91% of heavy rail vehicles met modern accessibility requirements and 99% of buses either had an accessibility certificate or had low-floor access by March 2018, compared to only 81% at March 2010.

**Aviation**

Launched Operation Matterhorn to repatriate over 140,000 people over a two-week period in Autumn 2019, resulting in the UK’s largest peacetime repatriation effort to date. The Civil Aviation Authority led the operation with support from HM Government, covering over 700 flights with support from 50 partners from
around the world. About 94% of people were flown back on the original day of their cancelled Thomas Cook flight.

**Environmental**

In 2019, along with BEIS, HMT and the devolved Administrations, consulted on options for ensuring that our post-Brexit approach to emissions trading is at least as ambitious as the current arrangement.

Worked with International Civil Aviation Organisation (ICAO) to secure the first worldwide scheme to address CO₂ emissions in any single sector, the carbon offsetting and reduction scheme for international aviation (CORSIA)

Established the independent commission on civil aviation noise in 2019, an important voice for communities concerned about the impact of aviation.

**Passenger interests**

Updated the ATOL scheme and brought it in to line with modern trade practices. In 2012, updated the scheme to address gaps in consumer protection by extending the ATOL scheme to include “flight-plus” arrangements. Then, passed the Air Travel Organisers’ Licensing Act 2017 to allow for UK businesses to trade across Europe more easily, and ensure a wider body of consumers are protected.

**Sustainable growth**

Set out that airspace modernisation, reforming the way airspace is used, is vital to help deliver quicker, quieter and cleaner journeys for passengers and businesses, legislation is forthcoming.

Made progress on delivering a revised aviation strategy, which aims to make the country’s aviation sector world-leading in prioritising passengers, fostering sustainable growth, and promoting trade.

**Connectivity**

Protected air routes into London that are in danger of being lost by providing financial support for several routes through public service obligations, currently routes from London to Dundee, Derry and Newquay.

**Drones**

Implemented a package of new legislation to keep our skies safe and secure, including extending the zones around airports in which it is illegal to fly drones above 400 feet or within the airport’s air traffic zone.

Worked with the Home Office, the police, and the Ministry of Justice to introduce primary legislation providing police with new powers to help tackle the misuse of unmanned aircraft, and contributed to the Home Office counter unmanned aircraft strategy.

Responded successfully to planned disruption by Heathrow Pause at Heathrow airport in September 2019.

**Aviation Security**

Created the first aviation security strategy in 2018 that sets out our strategic response to the threats to civil aviation. This is currently being revised.

Regulated that all major airports must introduce new 3D cabin baggage screening equipment by the end of 2022.

**Aviation Skills**

Recruiting a new general aviation advocate, and nine general aviation ambassadors.

Launched the women in aviation and aerospace charter in 2018, which seeks to bridge the diversity gap.

Launched the reach for the sky programme with the aim to increase the number of young people entering the sector as well as increase diversity.

**Maritime safety**

Published the maritime safety action plan in 2019, which sets out a number of actions to achieve ambitious safety targets.

**Maritime growth**

London international shipping week took place in 2019, helping to advance London’s status as the world’s capital for maritime services and demonstrate the UK maritime sector’s world-leading capabilities.

Published the maritime 2050 strategy in 2019, which provides a long-term strategic vision for the sector. It establishes clear trajectories against which Government and business can plan for the long-term, maintaining the UK’s position as a global maritime leader through to 2050.

**Maritime environment**

Published the clean maritime plan in 2019 which sets out how Government see the UK’s transition to a future of zero-emission shipping. It includes that by 2025, all new vessels being ordered for use in UK waters are designed with zero-emission propulsion capability, and zero-emission commercial vessels are in operation in UK waters.

**Other departmental priorities**

Provided significant input into the Government’s 2018 year of engineering, leading to 5.1 million direct experiences of engineering for seven to 16-year-olds.

Published the transport infrastructure skills strategy and set up a task force to deliver it. By mid-2019, some 5,000 new apprenticeships had been created.

Published the transport investment strategy in 2017 which sets out the Department for Transport’s priorities and approach for future transport investment decisions. Government have since confirmed that it is spending £72 billion in the five years to 2020-21 on transport. This strategy ensures Government’s investment decisions are aligned to wider goals, including building a stronger more balanced economy.

Published the transport infrastructure efficiency strategy in 2017.

Published the rail sector deal in December 2018 to build on the strong partnership working between the rail sector and the Government to exploit the opportunities of new technologies, improve the efficient use of our rail network capacity and enhance the experience of those who use our railways.

Established an organisation to boost the export of UK transport expertise.

**Brexit**

Substantial work preparing for Brexit and ensuring that sufficient contingency plans are in place in the event of a no-deal to keep freight moving and ensuring the supply of essential medicines into the country.

**Roads**

Passed the Haulage Permits and Trailer Registration Act 2018 which will ensure that the UK has the powers it needs to support British hauliers to continue operating internationally after exiting the EU.
Aviation

Put in place measures to ensure that flights between the UK and the EU can continue in any Brexit scenario.

Secured new bilateral agreements or effective mitigations in place for the 17 non-EU countries where market access is currently provided for by virtue of our EU membership. This includes new agreements with the US and Canada.

Put in place new arrangements to cover bilateral aviation safety agreements (BASAs) with the US, Canada and Brazil, which are currently provided for by virtue of our EU membership.

Ensured that in any Brexit scenario, UK security standards will be recognised, allowing for the continued flow of air cargo between the UK and EU.

Maritime

£10 million for 16 ports across England to help their preparation for Brexit through the port infrastructure resilience and connectivity fund.

Secured the supply of vital medicines to the UK after Brexit, whatever the circumstances.

WORK AND PENSIONS

Work of the Department

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): The Department for Work and Pensions is the UK’s biggest public service Department, supporting people into work and administering the state pension and a range of working age, disability and ill health benefits to around 20 million claimants and customers. The Department is carrying out a world-leading transformative welfare agenda, and has had great success in recent years, while the Health and Safety Executive continues to make the workplace safer.

Universal credit is the biggest change programme in Europe, and the UK is seen as a world leader in welfare. The roll out of universal credit is now complete and it is available in every Jobcentre across the country, with 94% of all claims paid in full and on time to 2.5 million people. This financial year we will spend over £95 billion on working age benefits and over £120 billion on benefits for pensioners, bringing the total welfare spending across government this year up to £220 billion.

The Government believe that work is a pillar of a strong economy, and that work should always pay—according to the 2018 universal credit full claimant service survey, 85% of claimants believe getting and keeping a job is their number one priority—with 75% feeling that having almost any job is better than being on benefits. Overall satisfaction among claimants has remained consistently high over the last three years, with four out of five people satisfied with the support they have received when claiming universal credit.

The next phase of universal credit, “Move to UC”, will open up work, allowing people to increase their hours without the penalties they would normally be subject to under tax credits. As of 26 September 2019 we have made over 13,800 severe disability premium transitional payments, worth on average £2,280. This represents over 90% of expected backdated payments, totalling over £37.2 million.

Universal credit introduced a single taper system so payments reduce in a transparent and predictable way as earnings increase, making sure we support claimants in their transition into work. Additionally, when we complete moving legacy benefit claimants over to universal credit, an estimated 700,000 more people will get paid their full entitlement because of universal credit—getting on average an extra £285 per month.

As universal credit was rolled out, we made the taper more generous, reducing it to 63%, which means claimants can work more hours and keep more of their benefits. And again, in April this year, we increased the universal credit work allowance by £1,000 per year. This means that 2.4 million households will keep an extra £630 of income each year.

To support our claimants, we have introduced additional dedicated specialist work coaches, with training covering domestic abuse support, mental health, support for those with disabilities and health conditions, through to specialised local employment support.

Furthermore, we have made changes to support the most vulnerable, such as reducing the length of the maximum single sanction from three years to six months.

From October this year we reduced the normal maximum level of deductions in universal credit from 40% to 30% of the standard allowance; lowering this rate could see a couple keep up to an extra £600 over 12 months.

To support families and households, we announced the policy to support a maximum of two children would no longer be extended to apply to children born before 6April 2017 in new claims to universal credit. We have also introduced more flexible childcare cost arrangements, as well increasing their worth from up to 70% to up to 85%.

Additionally, we provide alternative payment arrangements such as more frequent payment options and managed payments to landlords—we have created an online system for landlords to facilitate this. We also encourage payments to go to the main carer.

From April 2019, Citizens Advice have been delivering the new “Help to Claim” support service to claimants making a new claim for universal credit.

In 2012, we reformed the child maintenance system with the aim of increasing co-operation between separated parents to meet their financial responsibilities, as this produces the best outcomes for their children. The scheme promotes parental responsibility by encouraging clients to set-up a private family-based arrangement where appropriate—and removing the obligation to join the statutory scheme.

We introduced further enforcement powers at the end of 2018 to enable us to deduct child maintenance directly from a wider range of accounts, target complex earners via a calculation of notional income based on assets and to disqualify non-compliant parents from holding a UK passport.

In June 2019, the child maintenance service was managing 488,300 statutory child maintenance arrangements, covering 706,700 children.

The Government are committed to improving employment outcomes for disabled people and for those with long-term health conditions. We want to support...
employers to realise the benefits and insight that the huge pool of talented disabled people can bring to the workforce.

That is why we have committed to more than doubling the number of disability employment advisers in our Jobcentres to over 500 to provide specialist expertise to help disabled people enter employment. Alongside this, the Government are spending £55 billion a year on benefits to support disabled people and people with health conditions. That’s a record high and an increase of £10 billion in real terms since 2010.

In November 2017, “Improving Lives: The Future of Work, Health and Disability” set out the Government’s 10-year plan, including an ambition to see 1 million more disabled people in work by 2027.

Over the past six years, we have seen 1.15 million more disabled people in work, reaching a total of 4.1 million in the second quarter of 2019. This includes an increase of 404,000 over the first two years since the Government announced their 2027 goal.

We are working with employers through our disability confident scheme; over 14,000 employers have now signed up and all Government Departments are signed up to this scheme.

The Government have completed a consultation on their proposed reforms to statutory sick pay so that it will be better enforced, more flexible and cover the lowest paid employees for the first time.

The Health and Safety Executive continues to make the workplace safer. It has clarified guidance on health and safety regulations to improve employer understanding of the need to consider mental health alongside physical health when undertaking a first aid needs assessment. The UK continues to rate as one of the safest countries in Europe in terms of fatal injury and to perform well against EU countries on a range of other health and safety indicators.

Personal independence payment (PIP) is a more modern, dynamic and fairer benefit than the predecessor, disability living allowance. PIP focuses support on those experiencing the greatest barriers to living independently. The number of working-age people now receiving support from PIP and DLA is up by over 257,000 since PIP was introduced in 2013 and, crucially, a higher proportion of the over 2.2 million people on PIP receive the top rate of benefit than on DLA—31% compared to 15%. Claimants are also receiving their benefits sooner—the average time taken to process claims is down by over 60% since July 2014 for new claimants.

We have reduced the number of assessments for those receiving the highest level of support, where needs will not improve, as well as for people over the state pension age. Up to 325,000 pensioners will benefit from the change to ensure that pensioners will receive ongoing PIP awards with a light touch review at the 10-year point.

The Government’s pensions agenda will provide more security and safety to pensioners in retirement, tackle reckless behaviour from employers on people’s pensions and help more pensioners than ever before to plan for their retirement. In 2019-20 alone, the Government expect to spend over £120 billion on benefits for pensioners—this includes £99 billion of expenditure on the state pension.

Since 2012, 10 million workers have automatically enrolled into a workplace pension thanks to automatic enrolment. This policy alone has helped to reverse a decade of decline in savings and, as of 2019-20, an estimated extra £18.6 billion a year will go into workplace pensions.

We are building on the success of auto-enrolment, looking to make it easier for self-employed people to save. In December 2018 the Government published a report setting out their delivery plan for research and trials to identify the most effective options to increase pension savings among the 4.9 million self-employed workers and we will carry out these trials throughout 2019 to 2021.

The Government introduced the triple lock and, accordingly, the full yearly amount of the basic state pension is around £675 higher than if it had just been up-rated by earnings since April 2010. This is a rise of over £1,600 in cash terms.

Pioneering work has been undertaken to help more people prepare for retirement than ever before. Pensions dashboards—digital interfaces that will allow people to see online what they have in their various pensions, including their state pension—will put individuals in control of their data; they will, for the first time, provide clear and simple information regarding pension savings in one place online and help people reconnect with “lost” pensions pots.

The Government are also tackling reckless behaviour of employers that would strip people of their hard earned retirement funds. In February 2019 we announced measures to reduce irresponsible conduct from employers by extending the pension regulator’s powers, including the power to send business owners to jail.

Recognising that climate change is a defining national and international emergency, we have introduced three key measures to ensure that pension schemes understand their responsibilities in responding to it. Since January 2019, those running single employer occupational pension schemes are required to establish an effective system of governance, including consideration of environmental, social and governance factors related to investment assets in investment decisions; and schemes with 100 or more members must carry out and document a risk assessment of their system of governance including risks relating to climate change.

Furthermore, as of 1 October, trustees of occupational pension schemes must state their policy on how they take account of the financial risks of climate change when developing their investment strategies.

The Government are committed to ensuring that people have access to the information and guidance they need to make effective financial decisions throughout their lives. The Financial Guidance and Claims Act 2018 has brought together the services provided by Pension Wise, the Pensions Advice Service and the Money Advice Service into a single organisation.

We have promoted long-term savings and pensions products, including the lifetime individual savings account, to encourage and incentivise more people to make provision for long-term needs, including a house purchase and retirement. We are helping people to save for a workplace pension by helping to protect their savings and monitoring the products, charges, and processes adopted by pension schemes. We are also giving individuals...
the confidence to save and access their pension pots by providing more guidance and support on pensions through the establishment of the Money and Pensions Service which is delivering free and impartial money and pension guidance, along with debt advice.

We will continue to engage across Government to ensure that we are aligned with the industrial strategy, supporting the flexible working task force, and the careers strategy and the national retraining scheme—ensuring that skills provision meets the needs of an ageing demographic. We have introduced older claimant champions into all 34 Jobcentre Plus districts. We will also continue to work with employers through our business champion for older workers and the local enterprise partnerships. We will ensure there are provisions for older returners to the workplace by working with Government Equalities Office and HM Treasury, and are engaging with businesses to understand their concerns in line with changes to the ageing demographic of the workforce.

We have also been supporting everyone who can, and wants to work, to continue to work. Initiatives such as the fuller working lives strategy have led to more people aged 50-64 in employment than ever before. In addition to our legislative reform such as removing the default retirement age and extending the right to request flexible working, we are supporting employers to recruit, re-train and retain older workers.

Our record on employment is strong, and the number of people in work is up by over 3.6 million since 2010—a near-record high. The employment rate, at 75.9%, is also at a near-record high, with 1,000 more people moving into work on average every day since 2010.

Through our new enterprise allowance (NEA) scheme, we have supported 209,000 claimants to create over 130,000 businesses since 2011. On average, we have helped to launch 203 businesses by unemployed benefit claimants, every week since 2017.

UK nationals make up around 90% of all people in work and have accounted for 66% of the rise in employment over the last nine years. Additionally, over 60% of the growth in employment since 2010 has been outside London and the south-east. There are now more than 1 million fewer workless households than in 2010 and 730,000 fewer children living in a household where no one works.

Since 2010, over 75% of the growth in employment has been in full time work and employment, and employment high-skilled occupations has risen by over 2.9 million.

There are over 1.8 million more women in work since 2010, and the female unemployment rate is at 3.7%—a near record low; the black Asian and minority ethnic employment rate has reached 66.2%—a near record high—up 7.4% since 2010; and, the youth unemployment level has almost halved since 2010, to a near record low—falling by more than 130 on average every day. Furthermore, wages have been growing for 19 consecutive months.

We are providing targeted support for young people between the ages of 18 and 24 to get into employment, through the youth obligation support programme (YOSP), as well as other specialised support within Jobcentres for young people.

[HCWS66]
Written Statements

Monday 4 November 2019

CABINET OFFICE

Work of the Department

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Oliver Dowden): The Cabinet Office sits at the heart of Government, overseeing the delivery of the Prime Minister’s priorities and policies, and ensuring that taxpayers’ money is focused on high-quality public services. The Government need to do more, and better, for less, and we are achieving this with new ways of working. Procurement has undergone significant reform since the collapse of Carillion, the construction company, in 2018.

Between 2010 and 2015, the Cabinet Office helped drive Government efficiencies of £52 billion. Its work to cut costs and make savings, while supporting Departments to operate more effectively, has continued at pace across digital, procurement, fraud and beyond. At the same time, the Cabinet Office has focused on improving infrastructure delivery, maintaining the integrity of the union and co-ordinating national security. It has also launched significant new initiatives, including improved cyber-security, the Office for Veterans’ Affairs and the Geospatial Commission.

Value for taxpayers through outsourcing and commercial policy reform

Government Departments are working more closely with industry on quality public services and value for money, driving a reform agenda from the “Outsourcing Playbook” of guidelines, rules and principles launched in February 2019. This complements existing compulsory guidance, such as HM Treasury’s Green and Orange Books.

It also builds on our investment since 2010 in a stronger functional model, which has released significant cash and operational benefits through robust central leadership. In all, 14 Government functions across the civil service affect every civil servant and every part of Government. Each function sets strategies for efficiency and effectiveness, driving continuous improvement and leading to better quality services for citizens.

We estimate that from 2016-17, at least £2.5 billion in commercial benefits has been achieved by the central commercial team, working with Departments. In addition, we estimate that central procurement expertise and frameworks have delivered around £2 billion of benefits.

Our debt function, and its innovative debt market integrator policy—which provides additional capability—has collected at least £400 million between 2016-17 and 2017-18.

Our fraud and error function established the world’s first profession for counter fraud. It has identified counter fraud and error savings of at least £300 million across Government since 2017 and helped save at least £200 million via national fraud initiatives. It promotes the UK as a world leader in public sector counter fraud, well-positioned to share international best practice and contribute to the global fight against fraud and corruption.

The grants management function has developed the Government grants information system—the most comprehensive picture of the grants landscape published by Government online. Across Government it has helped managers to make more effective grants and has enabled the identification of inefficiencies and fraud, delivering value for money on taxpayers’ spending.

Cutting property costs from the central Government estate

The Government are also transforming their use of land and property. In 2017-18 we cut running costs for central Government estates by £22 million and took out 156,000 square metres—contributing to wider running cost savings of £760 million, in real terms, since 2010. Since 2015, sales of surplus property have raised an estimated £2.5 billion. Since 2013, the One Public Estate programme has invested £70 million across the public sector, including local Government. This has supported the collection of over £140 million in capital receipts and saving over £20 million of running costs.

Harnessing the power of digital for Government and the public

Making Government digital has been a major reform area since 2017. We estimate that from 2016-17 the Government Digital Service has enabled total benefits of around £1.9 billion with its advice on more streamlined and value-for-money approaches. The public has responded positively to our focus on digital: the number of users accessing GOV.UK Verify rose by 4.5 million between October 2017 and October 2019.

Supporting our veterans with better long-term outcomes

The UK aims to lead the world in its support for veterans. From its position at the centre of Government, the new Office for Veterans’ Affairs ensures that every Department plays its part in bringing about better outcomes for veterans, particularly in terms of their mental health, jobs and homes. With £5 million of funding secured for next year, the OVA will ensure that Departments work together, and with charities, to support veterans and showcase their contributions to society during and after leaving service.

Unlocking economic value through the new Geospatial Commission

The Cabinet Office aims to unlock up to £11 billion of economic value a year by making better location data accessible. A new digital map of underground pipes and cables will help save lives and reduce disruption caused by their being struck in error: pilot projects have begun in London and the North East. We are on track to deliver our National Geospatial Strategy in spring 2020, and also the digital OpenMastermap commitment.

Strengthening the UK’s cyber security

In its first three years, the National Cyber Security Strategy has driven transformational change across Government and society. The National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC), which links world-class intelligence capabilities with outward-facing public engagement, has given the UK an internationally-respected national technical authority.

Tackling the cyber threat relies on the UK having the necessary skills, talent, innovation and research. The National Cyber Security Programme has invested heavily in the domestic cyber sector, with funding and expert support for start-ups creating a pipeline of new services and expertise we need to remain a world-leading 21st century economy.
An ambitious international agenda complements domestic cyber interventions. Through diplomacy we seek to build consensus on the universal benefits of a free, open and secure cyberspace and shape the development of norms that dovetail with our values.

[HCWS82]

Business: Pre-election Period

The Parliamentary Secretary, Cabinet Office (Chloe Smith): The Prime Minister has today written to ministerial colleagues providing guidance on the conduct of Government business during the pre-election period. The Cabinet Secretary has also issued guidance to civil servants on their conduct during this period. The guidance comes into force at 00:01 on Wednesday 6 November.

Copies of the documents have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on www.gov.uk.

Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000: Statutory Review of Sums

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Oliver Dowden): As required under the Political Parties, Elections and Referendums Act 2000 (PPERA), this statement confirms that the Government will not be making an order during the course of this Parliament to alter the specified sums and reporting thresholds for (broadly) donations and loans to political parties and candidates.

PPERA allows the Secretary of State or the Minister for the Cabinet Office to amend the majority of the sums and reporting thresholds contained in the Act by order. This can be done either to reflect an alteration in the value of money (e.g. arising from a change in inflation rates) or to give effect to a recommendation made by the Electoral Commission.

Where the Secretary of State or the Minister for the Cabinet Office decides not to amend the sums contained in part 4, part 4A, schedule 11, section 95(B)(6), schedule 11 A, schedule 15 and schedule 19A of the Act, a statement must be made to Parliament explaining why. Broadly, these provisions set the sums and reporting thresholds relating to donations and loans to political parties and candidates.

PPERA allows the Secretary of State or the Minister for the Cabinet Office to amend the majority of the sums and reporting thresholds contained in the Act by order. This can be done either to reflect an alteration in the value of money (e.g. arising from a change in inflation rates) or to give effect to a recommendation made by the Electoral Commission.

Where the Secretary of State or the Minister for the Cabinet Office decides not to amend the sums contained in part 4, part 4A, schedule 11, section 95(B)(6), schedule 11 A, schedule 15 and schedule 19A of the Act, a statement must be made to Parliament explaining why. Broadly, these provisions set the sums and reporting thresholds relating to donations and loans to political parties and candidates.

The Government had no grounds to consider the existing sums in PPERA to be inappropriate. With the date now set for an early general election on 12 December, we are now unable to prepare and lay secondary legislation into force at 00:01 on Wednesday 6 November.

Copies of the documents have been placed in the Libraries of both Houses and published on www.gov.uk.

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

UK Space Agency: Sustainable Development

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The UK Space Agency is offering up to £8 million in grant funding to tackle sustainable development challenges in developing and emerging countries.

These challenges include the growing need for developing countries around the world to build resilience to the effects of climate change. Today’s funding will help to forge new partnerships with countries and better understand their needs.

This round of funding includes a collaboration with Australia’s national science agency CSIRO, who will provide match funding and invite UK organisations and other international partners to work with them on projects to deliver sustainable benefits to small island developing states in the Pacific.

The funding comes from the UK Space Agency’s international partnership programme, a £30 million-a-year-programme funded by the global challenges research fund.

Through supporting satellite-led information projects, the international partnership programme makes a real and practical difference to the lives of citizens and builds skills and expertise.

This is the third round of funding from the international partnership programme, which already supports 33 projects in 44 countries. These projects help developing countries tackle a wide range of challenges including deforestation, food security and disaster resilience.

In addition, this call invites consortiums to bid on any topic with any developing country. This will help to forge new partnerships with countries and understand their needs ahead of a follow-on funding call to underpin operational capabilities.

The international partnership programme is the world’s largest space for a sustainable development programme, involving 120 UK organisations and 147 international organisations since 2016. I am pleased to note that the programme was recently recognised by Space and Satellite Professionals International in the “Better Satellite World” awards.

[HCWS73]

Shale Gas Exploration

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrea Leadsom): This statement provides an update on the Government’s policy regarding shale gas exploration.

The Government continue to recognise the importance of natural gas as a source of secure and affordable energy as we aim to reach net zero emissions by 2050. The Committee on Climate Change predicts that we will still be consuming almost 70% of the gas we consume today in 2050 under our net zero target as significant reductions across building, industry and power are offset by demand for gas to produce hydrogen. It is therefore critical that the UK continues to have good access to natural gas from both domestic and international markets.

Given shale gas has the potential to provide a new source of domestic energy, the Government have supported the development of the UK shale gas industry. Domestic gas production provides jobs and other economic benefits. The industry is currently in an exploration phase and the Government have always been clear that it will only allow development in a way which is safe and sustainable—both for the environment and local people. We have therefore taken a precautionary, evidence-based approach to exploring this potential, underpinned by world-leading environmental and safety regulations.
Following seismic events in 2011 that were connected to shale gas exploration, the Government introduced regulations to mitigate these risks. A traffic light system was introduced to monitor real-time seismic activity during operations, with a clear framework for stopping operations in the event of specified levels of seismic activity.

The Government also introduced tighter controls over the shale gas industry through the Infrastructure Act 2015. This included the requirement for operators to obtain hydraulic fracturing consent from the Secretary of State which requires careful consideration and detailed scrutiny of the necessary technical and legislative requirements. This consent ensures that all the necessary environmental and health and safety permits have been obtained before activities can commence.

While the regulatory and legal framework for shale gas activities has operated effectively to date, it is right that Government and regulators regularly review whether it remains fit for purpose in light of further evidence from shale gas operations.

Cuadrilla, a private company exploring for onshore oil and gas, obtained hydraulic fracturing consent in 2018 to undertake shale gas exploration activity at their site at Preston New Road, Lancashire. Hydraulic fracturing operations took place in 2018 and 2019. Their operations were tightly controlled by the relevant independent regulators, including the Oil and Gas Authority, who are responsible for regulating the licensing of exploration and development of England’s onshore oil and gas reserves, including shale gas.

Following a seismic event of magnitude 2.9 on 26 August 2019, hydraulic fracturing at Preston New Road was suspended by the Oil and Gas Authority, in accordance with its strict regulatory controls. While seismicity was at a level below that at which we would expect significant damage, seismic activity at this level does impact local communities and was clearly unacceptable. An event of this significance was considered highly unlikely in the detailed plan that Cuadrilla provided to the regulator before their activities began.

In parallel to its action following the 26 August 2019 event, the Oil and Gas Authority has been analysing in detail data drawn from Cuadrilla’s earlier operations that took place at Preston New Road last year. This included commissioning a series of expert reports to better understand and learn from the induced seismicity observed in 2018. The Government have recently received these reports and they are being published alongside a summary of their findings by the Oil and Gas Authority today. The Oil and Gas Authority summary report contains a number of findings and interim conclusions and highlights that the causes of seismicity are highly dependent on local geology. While we cannot draw definitive direct comparisons between this site-specific evidence and other prospective shale gas sites, the limitations of current scientific evidence mean it is difficult to predict the probability and maximum magnitude of any seismic events, either in the Fylde or in other locations.

The Government have always been clear that we will take a precautionary approach and only support shale gas exploration if it can be done in a safe and sustainable way, and that we will be led by the science on whether this is indeed possible. It remains our policy to minimise disturbance to those living and working nearby, and to prevent the risk of any damage.

The Oil and Gas Authority intends to commission further research to incorporate new data from Cuadrilla’s more recent operations. The Oil and Gas Authority has made clear that it cannot evaluate with confidence whether a proposal to resume hydraulic fracturing in the Fylde, or to start operations elsewhere, will not cause unacceptable levels of seismicity. The OGA is therefore unlikely to approve future hydraulic fracturing plans unless new evidence is presented.

On the basis of the current scientific evidence, Government are confirming today that they will take a presumption against issuing any further hydraulic fracturing consents. This position, an effective moratorium, will be maintained until compelling new evidence is provided which addresses the concerns around the prediction and management of induced seismicity. While future applications for hydraulic fracturing consent will be considered on their own merits by the Secretary of State, in accordance with the law, the shale gas industry should take the Government’s position into account when considering new developments.

Finally, alongside the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government, I can confirm that the Government will not be taking forward proposed planning reforms in relation to shale gas that were subject to consultation last year. These include the proposals on the principles of a permitted development right for non-hydraulic exploratory shale gas development; making community pre-application consultation compulsory for shale gas development; and proposals to bring shale production development into the nationally significant infrastructure projects (NSIP) regime. Full Government responses which summarise the responses to these consultations have been published today.

[HCWS68]

TREASURY

**Tax Credits, Child Benefit and Guardian’s Allowance**

The Chief Secretary to the Treasury (Rishi Sunak):

The Government will bring forward regulations that will increase most tax credits rates and thresholds and will increase the Child Benefit and Guardian’s Allowance rates in line with the general rise in prices as measured by the September 2019 Consumer Price Index. The annual up-rating of benefits will take place for Tax Credits, Child Benefit and Guardian’s Allowance in the first full week of the tax year. In 2020, this will be the week beginning 6 April.

The annual up-rating process takes into account a variety of measures:

- The majority of working-age benefits were frozen at their 2015-16 levels for four years under the Welfare Reform and Work Act 2016. From April 2020, the majority of elements and thresholds in Working Tax Credit and Child Tax Credit will be increased by CPI (1.7%). In line with established practice and the Office for Budget Responsibility’s expectations in their welfare forecast, the maximum rate of the childcare element, the family element, the withdrawal rate and the income disregards will remain unchanged.
- Child Benefit will be increased in line with CPI (1.7%) from April 2020.
- As set out in legislation, Guardian’s Allowance will be uprated in line with prices, measured by CPI (1.7%).
The full list of proposed benefit and credit rates will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses in due course.

[HCWS75]

DEFENCE

Armed Forces Training: Ukraine

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):
The UK military training mission in Ukraine, Operation Orbital has been extended by a further three years to March 2023. UK armed forces personnel deployed on Operation Orbital have trained over 17,500 members of the armed forces of Ukraine since 2015. It is much appreciated by the Ukrainians and has helped to save lives. The training is focused on building the resilience and capacity of the Ukrainian armed forces. It includes the identification of mines and improvised explosive devices (IEDs), infantry skills, medical care and logistics. In 2018, the training was expanded to include anti-armour, counter-sniping and mortar planning. In early 2019, Operation Orbital was expanded to include training and support to the Ukrainian navy. We intend to develop it further over the next three years with more focus on maritime support and at the institutional and operational level.

This extension of Operation Orbital will mean we can train thousands more personnel in the armed forces of Ukraine and continue to make a real difference in support of Ukraine's sovereignty and territorial integrity.

[HCWS84]

Shipbuilding

The Secretary of State for Defence (Mr Ben Wallace):
I have today published Sir John Parker’s review of the implementation of the National Shipbuilding strategy. I am very grateful for Sir John’s efforts in producing this review and are delighted that he has identified so much positive progress. Sir John noted how Defence has embraced the strategy with enthusiasm and evident cultural change. A copy of the review has been placed in the Library of the House and it is available on www.gov.uk.

To build on the success and progress we have made so far, this Government are committed to reinvigorating British shipbuilding industry for both the civil and military sectors and investing in the next generation to ensure a pipeline of skills for the future. That is why the Prime Minister has appointed me to act as the Shipbuilding Tsar on behalf of this Government, to better realise the potential that this sector can offer across the four Home Nations and to reinvigorate UK shipbuilding. This role brings together other Government Departments to shape policies and strategies. As Shipbuilding Tsar, I will work closely with my colleagues across Government to bring together the brilliant work already being done, and to ensure British shipbuilding thrives.

A significant success already delivered by this key strategy and Sir John's recommendations is the Type 31 preferred bidder announcement to Babcock with contract award due by the end of the year. This major milestone demonstrates a transformation in the way this Department can deliver a rigorous warship acquisition programme securing the best capability for our armed forces and extraordinary value for money for the taxpayer. It is an exemplar of what Sir John Parker envisaged and has shown that the MOD can deliver contracts with a grip on content, specification, design and pace.

Sir John also acknowledged the impressive export success of the Type 26 which has already been selected as the baseline design to deliver nine Hunter class frigates for the Royal Australian Navy and up to 15 Canadian Surface Combatants for the Royal Canadian Navy. We will continue to build on this success and work alongside the Department for International Trade to deliver a competitive naval export plan. This will identify and strengthen opportunities for British shipbuilding and the wider supply chain.

Across Government, a huge amount of work is under way to review the pace and nature of the forward warship programme and to understand the skills needed to design and deliver these ships and their systems. We are already working collaboratively with industry to align these priorities and ensure we maintain the industrial base required to deliver future capability and platforms for our armed forces.

[HCWS85]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Biometrics and Forensics Ethics Group: Annual Report

The Minister for Crime, Policing and the Fire Service (Kit Malthouse): My noble Friend the Minister of State, Home Office (Baroness Williams of Trafford) has today made the following written ministerial statement:

I am pleased to announce the publication of the first annual report of the Biometrics and Forensics Ethics Group. The group was established to meet the current needs for ethical review following the expansion of the National DNA Database Ethics Group remit and provides Ministers with independent advice on matters relating to data ethics and ethical issues in forensic science and biometrics.

I would like to thank the group for their strategic advice concerning the use of biometric identifiers and for their continued oversight of the work of the Forensic Information Databases Service Strategy Board. Technologies pertaining to forensics and biometrics are rapidly evolving and the recommendations from the group are more relevant than ever before, particularly with the expansion of the group’s remit this year to include ethical problems posed by analysis of large data sets.

The Biometrics and Forensics Ethics Group annual report can be viewed on the website of the group at https://www.gov.uk/government/organisations/biometrics-and-forensics-ethics-group and a copy will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

[HCWS79]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Unauthorised Encampments: Police Powers

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): Today I am announcing the Government’s plans to consult on criminalising the act of trespassing...
when setting up an unauthorised encampment in England and Wales. I recognise the distress and misery that some unauthorised encampments cause to many communities and businesses across the country. Currently, this kind of trespass is a civil matter and the powers available to the police are limited.

My predecessor, my Right hon. Friend the Member for Bromsgrove (Sajid Javid), announced to the House of Commons on 6 February that we would carry out a public consultation on amending the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994 to lower the criteria that must be met for the police to be able to direct people away from unauthorised sites. He also announced that the Home Office would conduct a review of how trespassing while setting up an unauthorised encampment could be made a criminal offence in England and Wales, learning lessons from other countries like the Republic of Ireland, where this is already a criminal offence.

I am announcing today that having considered the legislation in the Republic of Ireland, I would like to test the appetite to go further than the original proposals. I would like to broaden the existing categories of criminal trespass to cover trespassers on land who are there with the purpose of residing in their vehicle for any period, and to give the police the relevant powers to arrest offenders in situ and to seize any vehicles or other property on unauthorised encampments promptly.

Tomorrow, we will launch a public consultation on whether criminalising unauthorised encampments would be preferable to the amendments we originally proposed to the Criminal Justice and Public Order Act 1994, and if so, how it should work. The consultation will be available tomorrow at www.gov.uk/government/consultations/strengthening-police-powers-to-tackle-unauthorised-encampments and will be open for four months. A copy of the consultation will also be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

I thank Members for their continued engagement on this important issue.

[HCWS80]

**Terrorism**

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): Today, the Joint Terrorism Analysis Centre (JTAC) changed the UK national terrorism threat level from ‘SEVERE’ to ‘SUBSTANTIAL’. This means that a terrorist attack is likely.

The decision to change the threat level is taken by JTAC independently of Ministers. JTAC conducts a formal review of the terrorism threat level every six months.

This is a systematic, comprehensive and rigorous process, based on the very latest intelligence and analysis of internal and external factors which drive the threat.

Despite the change in the threat level, terrorism remains one of the most direct and immediate risks to our National Security.

‘SUBSTANTIAL’ continues to indicate a high level of threat; and an attack might well occur without further warning.

As ever, the public should remain vigilant and report any concerns they may have to the police.

Government, police and intelligence agencies will continue to work tirelessly to address the threat posed by terrorism in all its forms. The threat level is kept under constant review.

[HCWS76]

**Work of the Department**


The first duty of Government is to protect the public. Since 1782, the Home Office has led work to keep the country safe from those who seek to do the country and its citizens harm. In doing so, we make a vital contribution to the Government’s plan for a stronger, fairer and outward-looking country.

The Home Office has a responsibility to tackle crime, fight terrorism, and secure our borders.

**Crime, Policing and Fire**

The Government have promoted public safety by strengthening policing capabilities, our response to serious violence, domestic abuse and extremism, strengthened our response to fires and civil emergencies and the harm that they cause and strengthened the safeguards on which vulnerable people rely.

We have strengthened the local democratic accountability of police forces through the introduction of police and crime commissioners (PCCs) in 2013, enabled greater collaboration between emergency services by providing powers for PCCs to take on responsibility for fire and rescue services (Policing and Crime Act 2017), provided powers for PCCs, and supported strong and integrated city regions with Mayors performing the role of a PCC.

We have supported our frontline police officers by providing £7.5 million to fund the national police wellbeing service and a £10 million fund to support the deployment of taser. We announced at the Queen’s Speech plans for a Police Protection Bill to put the police covenant on a statutory footing—giving legal protection to police drivers when pursuing a subject or responding to an emergency, and allowing special constables to join the Police Federation.

We responded to increased demands on our police, by providing the best police funding settlement in a decade in 2019-20, with total funding increasing by over £1 billion (including council tax) and by launching a recruitment campaign for 20,000 additional police officers over the next three years. £144 million was awarded, over a five-year period, for an uplift in armed policing capability and capacity in England and Wales to ensure we can respond more quickly and effectively to a terrorist attack (2017-18).

We have tackled the harm caused by drugs and serious violence through a new drug driving offence (Crime and Courts Act 2013), new powers to seize drug cutting agents (Serious Crime Act 2015), tackling “legal highs” (Psychoactive Substances Act 2016), tougher controls on knives and corrosive substances (Offensive Weapons Act 2019), funding £100 million in 2019-20 to support a surge in police operational activity and investing in violence reduction units. Establishing the national county lines co-ordination centre that has led to over 2,500 arrests, over 3,000 individuals engaged for safeguarding, and significant seizures of weapons and drugs. We have also changed the law to allow specialist clinicians to prescribe medicinal cannabis in 2018. For the first time in the UK, expert doctors have been given the option to legally issue prescriptions for cannabis-based medicines when they agree that their patients could...
benefit from this treatment. However, we are clear that this does not pave the way towards legalising cannabis for recreational use.

We have also introduced measures to reduce and prevent crime to ensure people feel safe in their homes and communities. We have invested £22 million to support early intervention programmes that prevent and tackle serious violence, and an additional £200 million in 2018 for the youth endowment fund to support important work in the community to prevent vulnerable children and young people from being drawn into crime and violence. We also launched a £25 million safer streets fund this year to help areas put measures in place to prevent burglary, theft and other offences in crime hotspots.

We have protected people from harm and supported victims, by tackling forced marriage and female genital mutilation (FGM) through the creation of FGM protection orders and criminalised breach of forced marriage protection orders (2015), a new offence of failing to protect a girl from FGM (2015), extended extra-territorial jurisdiction over FGM offences committed abroad (2015), and brought in a new FGM mandatory reporting duty (2015). We have protected people from domestic abuse by providing access to information through “Clare’s law”, committing £100 million (£80 million announced in 2016; an additional £20 million announced in 2017) to tackle violence against women and girls. We also announced at the Queen’s Speech that we would strengthen the protection and support for victims and their children through the introduction of the Domestic Abuse Bill.

We have tackled the harm caused by extremism through empowering 253 locally-led projects to challenge extremist narratives and increase the resilience of communities as part of our “Building a Stronger Britain Together” programme that has awarded around £9 million of Government funding since 2015, and through establishing the commission for countering extremism in 2018 to drive innovative thinking on how best to tackle extremism. We also launched the first counter-extremism strategy in 2015 to protect communities from the wider social harms caused by extremism. We also increased our funding for security measures to protect religious institutions from hate crime. We have awarded approximately £1.5 million to protect over 130 places of worship through our places of worship protective security programme.

We have published plans to ensure we can keep the public safe online. Working with the Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport (DCMS), we published the online harms White Paper earlier this year that sets out our plans for world-leading legislation to make the UK the safest place in the world to be online. This package comprises of legislative and non-legislative measures and will ensure companies have appropriate systems and processes in place to deal with harmful content to keep their users safe.

We have supported fire and rescue services to protect the public from fire in England, with the “Fire Kills” campaign contributing to a sustained fall in the number of fires and casualties, strengthening national capabilities to respond to major incidents including flooding, wildfires, or terrorist attacks, and providing stronger national leadership and accountability through the creation of an inspection regime (Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Constabulary and Fire and Rescue Services, HMICFRS) in 2017, a new independent Fire Standards Board (2018) and a Fire Protection Board (2019).

**Serious and organised crime**

The Home Office has also strengthened its response to tackling serious and organised crime.

We created the National Crime Agency (NCA) in 2013 to lead and co-ordinate UK law enforcement’s response to serious and organised crime by strengthening the UK’s borders, fighting economic crime, fraud, corruption and cyber-crime, and protecting children and young people from sexual exploitation and abuse. Since 2013, NCA operations have led to over 12,800 arrests in the UK and overseas, and over 8,200 children safeguarded. We also have disrupted serious and organised crime by establishing a network of regional organised crime units (ROCUs).

We published a new serious and organised crime strategy in 2018 to tackle the evolving threat and the increasing resilience and adaptability of criminal networks. The overarching strategic aim is that there will be no safe space for serious and organised criminals to operate. On 29 October we announced a review that will enhance the response to serious and organised crime. The review will look to identify ways of bolstering the response to threats such as county lines, people trafficking and drugs.

We have tackled the harm of modern slavery by becoming the first country in the world to introduce dedicated modern slavery legislation (Modern Slavery Act 2015) that included slavery and trafficking prevention and risk orders, by ensuring perpetrators can receive a maximum life sentence for these appalling crimes and by establishing the UK Anti-Slavery Commissioner. We have also invested £33.5 million into the modern slavery fund, delivered an ambitious package of reforms to the national referral mechanism (NRM), and launched the single competent authority in 2019. We have seen a six fold increase since December 2016 in the number of police led modern slavery operations (over 1,200 live operations as at the end of 2018-19).

We have made a significant investment in tackling all forms of child sexual exploitation and abuse in recent years and the step change in our response is already drawing this hidden crime out of the shadows as demonstrated by a 227% increase in reporting of child sexual abuse offences to police since 2013. We have announced an additional £30 million to safeguard children from child sexual exploitation and abuse. This additional funding, taken together with an additional 20,000 officers and more money for prosecutors and prison places, will help us redouble our efforts to tackle child sexual abuse. The additional funding will build on our significant investment in recent years, which included £40 million in a package of measures to protect children and young people from sexual abuse and exploitation in February 2017 and a further uplift of £21 million to improve how our law enforcement agencies reduce the volume of offending and pursue the most dangerous and prolific offenders, announced in September 2018. In 2016 all UK police forces, and the National Crime Agency, were connected to the child abuse image database, allowing them to identify and protect victims quicker than before.

We are also leading international efforts to tackle what is a cross-border crime through the Five Country Ministerial and the UK-funded WePROTECT Global Alliance summit.
We have tackled cyber-crime through launching cyber-crime units in each of the 43 police forces across England and Wales, and teams to tackle illicit use of the dark web across regional and organised crime units. We also established the national cyber-crime unit in 2013, a powerful new unit within the National Crime Agency to collaborate with partners to fight cyber-crime, protect the public and reduce harm to the UK from online crime.

We have recognised the impact that economic crime has on the public and how this underpins serious and organised crime. The national economic crime centre (NECC) was established to act as the national authority for the UK’s law enforcement response, which froze £65 million worth of assets in the first year and in 2018-19 almost £217 million of the proceeds of crime was collected. The global standard-setter for anti-money laundering and counter-terrorist financing, the financial action task force, assessed in 2018 that the UK has the strongest regime of over 60 countries assessed to date. Since 2014, the joint money laundering taskforce has provided a mechanism for law enforcement and the financial sector to share information and work more closely to tackle money laundering and economic crime. In January 2019, the Government established a new public-private partnership to tackle economic crime, and in July 2019 we published a new asset recovery action plan and a public-private economic crime plan. We also introduced new legislation, the Criminal Finances Act 2017, that improved our ability to tackle money laundering and corruption and recover the proceeds of crime and counter-terrorist financing. This included the creation of unexplained wealth orders that required those suspected of corruption to explain the sources of their wealth, and helped to facilitate the recovery of illicit wealth, stopping criminals using the UK as a safe haven for the proceeds of international corruption.

**Security and counter-terrorism**

The Home Office is responsible for keeping the United Kingdom safe from the threat of terrorism.

We have equipped our law enforcement and emergency responders with capabilities to protect citizens against the threat from terrorism and provided an additional £160 million for counter-terrorism policing this year (2019-20) taking funding for counter-terrorism policing to over £300 million. From July 2010 to June 2019 there have been 2,661 persons arrested, with 1,667 charged to over £800 million. From July 2010 to June 2019 there have been 2,661 persons arrested, with 1,667 charged for terrorism-related activity under the Terrorism Act 2000 and subsequent legislation. In addition, we continue to provide executive oversight of M15, under the Security Service Act 1989 (amended in 1996).

We have introduced legislation which balanced new powers to help the UK respond to the threat of terrorism and protect the public with safeguards for civil liberties. We introduced the Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019 to close gaps in existing counter-terrorism legislation and ensure compatibility with the digital age, and the Counter-Terrorism and Security Act 2015 increased the legal powers and capabilities of law enforcement and intelligence agencies to disrupt terrorism and prevent individuals from being radicalised, and the Terrorism Prevention and Investigation Measures Act 2011 (TPIMs) introduced a new system to replace the control order system.

We strengthened our response to tackling terrorism following the attacks in 2017 that claimed 36 lives and changed the lives of many more. We launched a strengthened counter-terrorism strategy (CONTEST) in 2018; introduced the victims of terrorism unit to ensure support to all those affected by terror attacks in the UK and overseas; and both M15 and counter-terrorism policing conducted reviews to learn lessons and improve the operational response.

The Home Office has stopped and prevented dangerous groups from harming UK citizens. We have added 33 groups to the list of proscribed organisations, extended the proscription of Hezbollah and implemented 10 name change orders covering 20 aliases. The Home Office has also hardened the country’s defences against hostile state activity. Following the poisoning of Sergei and Yulia Skripal in Salisbury in March 2018, we worked with the Foreign and Commonwealth Office to expel 23 Russian diplomats who had been identified as undeclared Russian intelligence officers. The Counter-Terrorism and Border Security Act 2019 included a power for the police to stop individuals at UK ports and the Northern Ireland border area to determine if they are or have been involved in hostile state activity, and we are currently considering whether further primary legislation is required in this area. We have also ensured the removal of people who pose a threat to this country to keep our citizens safe. Following the exportation of Abu Qatada and removal of other terror suspects who pose a risk to the safety of this country and whose presence would not be conducive to the public good. We achieved the extradition of Abu Hamza to the US where he has been convicted of serious terrorist charges.

We have ensured that communities are safe by preventing vulnerable individuals from radicalisation and rehabilitating them where necessary. We have provided support to individuals assessed as being vulnerable to radicalisation through the Channel programme. During 2017-2018, a total of 7,318 individuals were referred to the Prevent programme with 1,314 individuals referred on to, and supported by, Channel. We have also worked with civil society organisations to deliver Prevent local projects to around 300,000 people from 2014 to build resilience to terrorist and extremist ideology.

We have worked to ensure that we tackle terrorism and protect our citizens by working with tech companies to remove illegal terrorist content from the internet. We showed global leadership by playing a key role in the establishment of the global internet forum to counter terrorism to ensure international co-ordination on this issue, and we announced in 2018 the development of new technology to automatically detect terrorist video content on any online platforms.

We have developed and implemented robust investigatory capabilities with strong privacy protections enabled by the world-leading Investigatory Powers Act 2016, which maintains essential powers and enhances safeguards to underpin intelligence agency and law enforcement operations to protect the public. We have signed the world-first data access agreement with the US, which will strengthen and speed up investigations into organised crime, child abuse and other serious crimes. We have also established a world-leading oversight regime through the office of Investigatory Powers Commissioner (IPC) to oversee the use of these powers, and the Office for Communications Data Authorisations, under the remit of the IPC, which independently authorises requests for communications data. On encryption, we have led international efforts to stop companies designing out their ability to access communications, even where this access is necessary to save lives.
We have also published the world leading counter-unmanned aircraft strategy in October 2019 that will allow us to harness and safeguard the economic and social potential drones can bring to the UK and to protect the public from malicious or negligent use.

Border, immigration and citizenship system

We have tackled illegal immigration by doubling the maximum penalty for employing an illegal worker to £20,000, simplifying right to work checks and strengthening the ability to collect unpaid penalties (Immigration Act 2014). These measures allowed us to deport foreign criminals under “deport first; appeal later”. We have shut down bogus colleges; and cracked down on illegal working and sham marriages. We also introduced the Immigration Act 2016 provided new powers for councils to crack down on unscrupulous landlords and evict illegal migrants more quickly, extended the successful “deport first; appeal later” measures, and created a new offence of illegal working which means people who are here illegally cannot benefit from working.

We have tackled foreign national offenders, deporting almost 50,000 since 2010, and are legislating to increase the penalties for those seeking to enter in breach of their deportation order. In 2018-19, immigration enforcement made 593 disruptions (of these 71 were major) against individuals and organised crime groups (OCGs) involved in the exploitation of people through modern slavery and organised immigration crime. This is an increase of 42% and 41% respectively on the previous year for the number of total disruptions and major disruptions.

The Immigration Act 2016 also introduced the immigration health surcharge to ensure migrants coming to the UK for a time-limited period contribute to the national health service, and the immigration skills charge that placed a levy on businesses to help improve the skills of British workers.

We have transformed our visa operations with the same-day super priority visa service, the only European country to offer a visa decision in 24 hours. We have also reformed the study visa system to tackle abuse, while at the same time the UK remains the second most popular destination in the world for students. University sponsored applications increased by 11% last year to over 202,000—the highest ever level, and 31% higher than in 2010-11. W e have worked with the scientific community to develop a new fast-track visa route for the brightest and best, with a view to launching it later this year. The fast-track immigration route will be designed for elite researchers and specialists in science, engineering and technology, ranging from those at the very start of their careers to the winners of internationally recognised prizes and fellowships.

We have tightened up our controls on borders and immigration ahead of and in preparation for our departure from the EU by recruiting up to 1,000 additional Border Force staff. We have committed to end to freedom of movement between the EU and the UK and pave the way for a new points-based system. We have extended ePassport gates to nationals of Australia, Canada, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, South Korea and the United States showing that global Britain is already open for business.

We have strengthened our borders to help tackle the trafficking of drugs and illegal goods. Border Force made 43,930 drug seizures from financial year 2010-11 to 2017-18, with an increase in annual drug seizures from 3,954 in 2010-11 to 6,545 in 2017-18.

We successfully developed and launched the EU settlement scheme in March 2019, a free scheme enabling EU citizens resident in the UK, to obtain the status they will require to live and work in the UK in future. The latest internal figures show there have been over 2.2 million applications and more than 1.8 million people have been granted status. We are processing up to 20,000 applications a day.

We have reduced asylum claims made in Britain from a peak of 84,000 in 2002 to around half that. In order to dissuade people from making the dangerous journey across the Mediterranean, we have resettled 17,000 of the most vulnerable refugees affected by the conflict in Syria since 2015 and are on track to reach our commitment to resettle 20,000 refugees by 2020. We also increased the amount of money we pay to local authorities to look after unaccompanied asylum-seeking children by up to 33% in May 2019. We granted protection to 18,519 people in year ending June 2019 (up 29% from the previous year).

The Government deeply regret what happened to some members of the Windrush generation and have made it clear that responding to this is a priority. On 24 May 2018 the Home Office announced the Windrush scheme, which ensures that people affected directly, their children born in the UK and those who arrived in the UK as minors can apply for citizenship, or various other immigration products, free of charge. In total, 8,124 individuals have been granted some form of documentation, either under the initial arrangements put in place prior to the establishment of the Windrush scheme or under the Windrush scheme itself.

[HCWS81]

JUSTICE

Judicial Conduct Investigations Office: Annual Report

The Lord Chancellor and Secretary of State for Justice (Robert Buckland): With the concurrence of the Lord Chief Justice, I will today publish the thirteenth annual report of the Judicial Conduct Investigations Office (JCIO).

The JCIO supports the Lord Chief Justice and the Lord Chancellor in our joint statutory responsibility for judicial discipline.

The judiciary comprises approximately 23,000 individuals serving across a range of jurisdictions. Over the past year, the JCIO received 1,672 complaints against judicial office holders. Fifty-five investigations resulted in disciplinary action.

I have placed copies of the report into the Libraries of both Houses, the Vote Office and the Printed Paper Office. Copies are also available online at: https://judicialconduct.judiciary.gov.uk/reports-publications/

[HCWS77]

NORTHERN IRELAND

Independent Reporting Commission: Second Substantive Report

The Secretary of State for Northern Ireland (Julian Smith): I have received the second substantive report from the Independent Reporting Commission (IRC).
The IRC emanated from the Fresh Start agreement of November 2015. The agreement set out the Northern Ireland Executive’s commitments around tackling paramilitary activity and associated criminality. This work continues to be taken forward through a Northern Ireland Executive Action Plan which contains 43 recommendations.

This second substantive report builds on the work already undertaken by the Commissioners. While the report provides an update on progress achieved to date, the Commission rightly continues to remind us of the challenging work still to be done. Also, as my predecessor referenced last year, the absence of a functioning executive continues to have an adverse impact on delivery of this important work. I remain resolute in finding a way forward in relation to that.

I would like to thank the Commissioners for all of their work to date.

[HCWS72]

ELECTORAL COMMISSION COMMITTEE

Contingencies Fund Advance: The Electoral Commission

Bridget Phillipson (Representing the Speaker’s Committee on the Electoral Commission): As a general election will now be held on 12 December, the Electoral Commission will be required to undertake additional unplanned work to provide guidance to parties, non-party campaigners, candidates and electoral administrators; to observe and report on the election; to secure compliance with political finance law in relation to party and campaigner spending; to raise public awareness of the election and voter registration deadlines; and to ensure resilience of the commission’s functions through this important electoral event. Because unscheduled electoral events are not included in the plans approved by Speaker’s Committee for the main estimate, additional funding will be required.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £2,500,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for the Electoral Commission. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £2,500,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS70]

INDEPENDENT PARLIAMENTARY STANDARDS AUTHORITY COMMITTEE

Contingencies Fund Advance: Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority

Sir Charles Walker (Representing the Speaker’s Committee for the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority): As a general election will be held on 12 December, the Independent Parliamentary Standards Authority will be required to undertake additional unplanned work to support new, departing and returning MPs in setting up and winding up their offices and providing other guidance and support. Unscheduled elections events are not included in the main estimate plans approved by Speaker’s Committee for IPSA, and additional funding will therefore be required.

Parliamentary approval for additional resources of £30,150,000 will be sought in a supplementary estimate for IPSA. Pending that approval, urgent expenditure estimated at £30,150,000 will be met by repayable cash advances from the Contingencies Fund.

[HCWS71]

WORK AND PENSIONS

Employment, Social Policy, Health and Consumer Affairs Council


The UK Government have decided that from 1 September until exit day, UK Ministers and officials will only attend EU meetings where the UK has a significant national interest in the outcome of the discussions.

[HCWS69]

Welfare and Pensions Update

The Secretary of State for Work and Pensions (Dr Thérèse Coffey): I am announcing the proposed social security benefit and pension rates for 2020/21.

More than 10 million people in receipt of working-age benefits will see their payments increase at the rate of inflation next year.

Some 2.5 million people on universal credit and claimants on legacy benefits will receive a 1.7% rise in April. This includes people receiving jobseeker’s allowance (JSA), employment and support allowance (ESA), income support, housing benefit and universal credit.

The basic and new state pensions will increase at the highest rate for 8 years, by 3.9%, boosting the retirement incomes of 13 million people. Pensioners receiving the full new state pension will get an extra £344 a year. The basic state pension will increase by £263 a year.

The pension credit standard minimum guarantee for a couple will be £265.20 a week, the basic state pension will be £134.25 per week, the full rate of the new state pension will be £175.20 per week, and the universal credit standard allowance couple one or both over 25 will be £507.37 a month.

The annual up-rating of benefits will take place for state pensions and most other benefits in the first full week of the tax year. In 2020, this will be the week beginning 6 April.

A corresponding provision will be made in Northern Ireland and the Scottish Government will lay its own statutory instrument in respect of increases to carer’s allowance in Scotland.

The annual up-rating process takes into account a variety of measures:

The basic and new state pensions will be increased by the Government’s “triple lock” commitment, meaning that they will be up-rated in line with the highest of prices (CPI), earnings or 2.5%. Consequently, they will be up-rated by 3.9% (the May-July average weekly earnings figure).
The pension credit minimum guarantee will also be increased by earnings in line with legislation. The pension credit savings credit maximum amount will be increased in line with CPI (1.7%).

Benefits linked to the additional costs of disability, and for carers, are increased by the annual rise in prices (1.7%). A number of other elements—including non-dependent deductions—will also be up-rated in line with prices.

Working age benefits will be increased by CPI (1.7%) from April 2020. Those linked to child tax and working tax credits will be up-rated in line with those benefits.

Universal credit work allowances will be increased in line with CPI (1.7%) from April 2020.

The full list of proposed benefit and pension rates will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses in due course.

This will increase expenditure on social security benefit and pension rates by £5 billion. This includes £3.9 billion more to be spent on pensioner benefits. From April 2020 the yearly basic state pension will be worth over £1900 more in cash terms than in 2010. £1 billion more will also be spent on working-age benefits, ensuring that we continue to support the most vulnerable in society.

[HCWS74]
Intimidation in Public Life

The Minister for the Cabinet Office and Paymaster General (Oliver Dowden): In July 2017, the then Prime Minister commissioned the independent and respected Committee on Standards in Public Life to undertake a review into abuse and intimidation in elections. This followed concerning evidence from many parliamentary candidates—across the political spectrum—on their experiences during the 2017 general election.

For those in public life, it has become harder and harder to conduct any political discussion, on any issue, without it descending into tribalism and rancour. Social media and digital communication—which in themselves can and should be forces for good in our democracy—are being exploited and abused, often anonymously.

It is important to distinguish between strongly felt political debate on one hand, and unacceptable acts of abuse, hatred, intimidation and violence. British democracy has always been robust and oppositional. But a line is crossed when disagreement mutates into intimidation.

Left unchecked, abuse and intimidation will change our democracy and mean that the way Members interact with constituents will need to change. Increasing levels of threats directed at those in public life is a worrying trend that will require a co-ordinated and thorough response from Government, the relevant authorities, businesses and the public themselves to address.

As the general election campaign commences, I want to update the House on the actions that the Government have taken to tackle intimidation, and the steps that the Government are taking in this specific election.

Prosecution guidance

We have worked with the Law Officers to publish new guidance from the Crown Prosecution Service (CPS) for the legal authorities on the laws on intimidation, and the wide range of areas in which intimidation can be prosecuted under existing laws. This has been complemented by guidance to the police from the National Police Chiefs Council.


The National Police Chiefs Council (NPCC), CPS, College of Policing and Electoral Commission have also issued “Joint Guidance for Candidates in Elections” at: https://www.electoralcommission.org.uk/i-am-a/candidate-or-agent, which is distributed by the Electoral Commission.

Supporting local councils

We have passed legislation to remove the requirements for candidates running for local government, parish council, and local mayoral elections, to have their addresses on their ballot papers.

We have written to local authority chief executives, to raise awareness about the sensitive interest provisions in the Localism Act 2011 which protect the personal addresses of councillors in England, ensuring that monitoring officers are aware of the guidance published by the Ministry of Housing, Communities and Local Government.

New legislation to tackle intimidation

We have consulted on our internet safety strategy Green paper, and we published the world leading Department for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport-Home Office online harms White Paper in April 2019. This set out a range of legislative and non-legislative measures detailing how we will tackle online harms and set clear responsibilities for tech companies to keep UK citizens safe. It established a Government-wide approach to online safety, delivering the digital charter’s ambitions of making the UK the safest place in the world to be online, whilst also leading the world in innovation-friendly regulation that supports the growth of the tech sector.

The White Paper set out the Government’s intention to introduce a new mandatory “duty of care”, which will require relevant companies to take reasonable steps to keep their users safe and tackle illegal and harmful activity on their services. It stated that the new regulatory framework will make clear companies’ responsibility to address the harm of “online abuse of public figures”. The White Paper also included ambitious measures to support education and awareness for all users and to promote the development and adoption of new safety technologies.

The Cabinet Office has undertaken a public consultation entitled “Protecting the Debate: Intimidation, Influence and Information”. From that we committed to legislate to introduce a new electoral offence, clarify the electoral offence of undue influence of a voter, and introduce a digital imprints regime.

Digital imprints

We recognise the important arguments in favour of having a digital imprints regime in place as soon as possible, but it was not possible to legislate for and implement a regime in advance of a December election.

Technical considerations would need to be addressed, for example to avoid the need for individual candidates and campaigners to publish their home addresses as part of an imprint. Moreover, for a digital imprints regime to work properly, political parties, campaigners and others would need to understand on what material they are required to include an imprint. Rushing into a new regime—that could have proved unworkable—could have led to significant issues, including confusion, unintentionally stifling democratic debate or to people unknowingly committing an offence.

The Government are committed to implementing a digital imprints regime as soon as they can but it must be a workable regime.

Defending democracy programme

On 22 July 2019, the Government announced the defending democracy programme that will help maintain the integrity of our democracy and electoral processes. This cross-Government programme, led by the Cabinet Office, has been set up to:

- protect and secure UK democratic processes, systems and institutions from interference, including from cyber, personnel and physical threats;
strengthen the integrity of UK elections; encourage respect for open, fair and safe democratic participation; and promote fact-based and open discourse, including online.

Earlier this year, this Government committed to publishing a consultation on electoral integrity, which will look at measures to improve voters’ confidence in our democracy.

Protection of candidates

The parliamentary liaison and investigations team (PLAIT) and the Members security support team (MSSS) will continue to support Members once they become candidates after Dissolution. Personal security advice and guidance has been provided to all Members, and there is a package of security measures available for homes and constituency offices.

Local police forces are chiefly responsible for the security of candidates. As such, they have been briefed on their responsibilities regarding the delivery of protective security measures. The Home Secretary wrote to chief constables on 2 October 2019, and the Security Minister wrote to Police and Crime Commission, to ensure that they prioritised tackling the intimidation and abuse of Members and candidates.

Local police forces also have a dedicated point of contact for candidates who can be contacted for security advice. All urgent concerns, or contact outside of office hours, should be directed to police control rooms, who have been briefed to provide suitable guidance and support.

Recognising that intimidation can take a number of forms, the Cabinet Office will co-ordinate with the police, the National Cyber Security Centre (NCSC) and others to issue a package of security guidance, including how to report it. Following the Dissolution of Parliament, this guidance will be sent to all returning officers, to be issued to all candidates in every constituency.

The Cabinet Office, in its cross-Government co-ordination role, has set up an election cell which will meet regularly during the election campaign period and whose attendees include organisations responsible for the safety of candidates.

Advice to candidates regarding abuse online

Social media helps Members and candidates connect with the public and can and should be a force for good in our democracy. However, there have been worrying trends of abuse and threats directed towards Members of all parties, and particularly female and BAME Members. The Government believe this is completely unacceptable.

Illegal activity online should be treated in the same way as illegal activity offline, and reported to the police. Social media companies, such as Facebook and Twitter, have also developed guidance and dedicated mailboxes for reporting abuse and intimidation against candidates during an election. Today, the Home Secretary, Secretary of State for Digital, Culture, Media and Sport and I have written to social media companies asking them to work together during this election to provide clear advice to candidates in one place so candidates know what content breaches their terms and conditions, where to report suspected breaches and what they can expect once a report has been made. We have also asked that they work together to identify where abusive users towards candidates are migrating between platforms and to encourage more proactivity on this.

A copy of this letter has been placed in the House of Commons Library.

Democracy is a fundamental British value and one underpinned by respectful, vibrant and robust debate. But this freedom cannot be an excuse to cause harm, spread hatred or impose views upon others—a line is crossed when disagreement mutates into intimidation, violence or abuse.

Our politics will be the poorer if talented potential candidates—people who just want to stand to represent their peers and stand up for their areas—decide not to get involved out of fear for their or their loved ones safety. If fewer candidates put themselves forward, then voters will have less choice at the ballot box.

The Government will take all necessary steps to protect the debate, have put in place measures to support candidates with their safety for this election and have ambitious plans to tackle online and offline abuse of those in public life beyond.

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Audit Reform

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrea Leadsom): The Government recognise the role that audit plays in the effective functioning of the UK’s financial markets and broader economy.

To help meet our ambition that the UK should become the best place in the world to work and to grow a business, we must take forward reform of audit. This will include reforming audit, the audit regulator, and the audit market. Change would affect a large number and a wide variety of companies, firms, and interests; but it is clear that there is a need for truly long-lasting and effective change.

I want to see the UK leading the world in the next phase of improvement for corporate governance and audit. In the first quarter of next year—when I have considered Sir Donald Brydon’s recommendations—I intend to bring together all relevant elements of reform in order to take that forward.

I am already working to create the new audit, reporting and governance authority, to replace the Financial Reporting Council. I have started with appointing new leadership at the Financial Reporting Council, who are driving a new vision and culture for the regulator. They are now implementing those recommendations made in Sir John Kingman’s excellent report that are not contingent on legislative change.

Future reform will cover not just the function of the regulator, but also the purpose and function of the audit market, and audit itself. I intend to bring forward an ambitious and coherent programme of change that drives up quality, resilience and choice. It will include proposals on the function and oversight of audit committees and new internal control arrangements within businesses; on the responsibilities of boards and directors; on how both investors and regulators can better hold companies and their auditors to account; and to reduce the reliance on a few large audit firms for the provision of audit.
All of those factors must be and will be assessed and weighed together, so that the whole package is coherent and effective. As recognised by the Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Committee, whose work on audit I welcome, some reform will require radical action in order to ensure that it is meaningful and enduring, and that it fully addresses the very real concerns that we all share with the current state of the market.

[HCWS102]

Cobham plc Merger

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrea Leadsom): On 25 July 2019, the boards of Cobham plc and a subsidiary of funds managed by Advent International, a US private equity firm, announced that they had reached agreement on the terms of a recommended cash acquisition of Cobham for approximately £4 billion.

On 17 September, following advice from relevant Government Departments and agencies, I initiated a public interest intervention under the Enterprise Act 2002 into this merger on the grounds of national security. I required that the Competition and Markets Authority investigate the merger and provide me with a report on the transaction by 29 October, which it has done. The Secretary of State for Defence has also written to me about the national security implications of the merger and the discussions which have taken place with the parties to propose undertakings to address those implications. I am grateful for the advice I have received and the constructive engagement from the parties.

The decision on how to proceed in this case requires further full and proper consideration of the issues. Having received these reports, I will therefore have further discussions with my ministerial colleagues and the parties to the transaction to inform the decision-making process. I will update the House in due course so that hon. Members can scrutinise the Government’s decision. The full legal process will continue to be followed throughout the general election period.

[HCWS86]

Work of the Department

The Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Andrea Leadsom): I would like to update the House on some of the key achievements of the Department for Business, Energy and the Industrial Strategy since it was created in July 2016.

Leading the world in tackling climate change

Achieving net zero carbon emissions is a key departmental priority and we have set out actions we are taking across the economy to accomplish this.

We committed to set a legally binding target to end the UK’s contribution to climate change to net zero by 2050.

We have set out further actions we are taking across the economy to achieve net zero by 2050. These include adding around 6GW of clean energy to the grid by 2025 through the contracts for difference (CfD) scheme, enough to power over 7 million homes at record low costs.

We announced £200 million of initial funding for a programme which aims to design and build a nuclear fusion plant by 2040, looking to exploit the potential for clean, safe and inexhaustible power.

We announced £27.8 million of Government funding to advance carbon capture, utilisation and storage (CCUS) technologies in the UK, a crucial step towards the UK’s net zero emissions.

We announced investment of up to £1 billion over five years to boost the production of key green technologies in the motor industry, including batteries, electric motors, power electronics and hydrogen fuel cells. This is in addition to £400 million for electric vehicle charging infrastructure.

The UK was nominated to host the COP26 UN climate talks next year in partnership with Italy, recognition by world leaders of our strong global on climate issues.

UK emissions in 2019 were 42% lower than in 1990, while growing the economy by 72%. The UK has delivered fastest decarbonisation in G20 since 2000 according to PWC.

The UK’s fifth carbon budget was passed into law, equivalent to a 57% reduction on 1990 levels by 2032.

We committed £5.8 billion of international climate finance from 2016 to 2021, placing us among the world’s leading providers of climate finance, in addition to the £3.87 billion we provided from 2011 to 2016. The Prime Minister later announced the doubling of international climate finance spend to £11.6 billion.

Our international climate finance programmes are delivering real results on the ground and are catalysing wider change.

Among others, we have built the market for concentrated solar power (CSP) in developing countries.

We have contributed £720 million to the green climate fund, financing projects and programmes in a range of developing countries.

We published the Clean Growth Strategy: Leading the way to a low carbon future policy paper. This set out the strategy for decarbonising all sectors of the UK economy through the 2020s, benefiting the economy while meeting commitments to tackle climate change.

We held the UK’s first green GB week in 2018, a week to celebrate clean growth and raise awareness regarding how the public and businesses can tackle climate change.

We launched the smart export guarantee consultation which proposed that large electricity suppliers must offer small scale generators a price per kWh for the electricity they export to the grid. The scheme came into force in June 2019.

We are taking action to make sure the UK’s energy system has adequate capacity and is diverse and reliable.

We gave the go-ahead agreement to proceed with the first nuclear power station in a generation at Hinkley Point C to ensure future low-carbon energy security. Hinkley will provide 7% of Britain’s electricity needs for 60 years. UK-based businesses will benefit from more than 60% of the £18 billion value of the project, and 26,000 jobs and apprenticeships will be created.

We continued to support the capacity market auctions. The capacity market aims to ensure security of electricity supply by providing a payment for reliable sources of capacity, alongside electricity revenues, to ensure the delivery of electricity when needed.

The Department’s ambition is for the UK to have the lowest energy costs in Europe, for both households and businesses.
The Domestic Gas and Electricity (Tariff Cap) Bill put a requirement on the independent regulator, Ofgem, to cap energy tariffs until 2020. It came into force in January 2019, saving customers on default tariffs around £76 on average and as much as £120 on the most expensive tariffs.

As of March 2019, there were over 14.3 million meters operating under the smart meter programme. A total of 82,000 smaller businesses have been supported by the British Business Bank.

The Brydon review examined the quality and effectiveness of the audit market and looked at what audits should be in the future. It addressed the audit expectation gap: the difference between what people think an audit does and what it actually does. It will also look at the scope of an audit, any changes that may need to be made to it and how it can better serve the public interest.

We consulted on the competition and markets authority’s far-reaching and ambitious recommendations to improve quality, resilience and competition in the statutory audit market. We are committed to acting on the CMA’s findings and will respond as soon as possible.

We established the Office for Product Safety and Standards to enhance consumer protections. We published the Consumer Green Paper, aimed at responding to the challenges and opportunities of modern consumer markets via a regulatory and competition framework. This was followed by consultation and engagement on the Green Paper.

We carried out a Smart Data Review and proposed a set of measures to ensure consumers’ data is handled with the security they expect, while enabling them to continue to have access to the best deals available.

The Government asked Matthew Taylor to conduct an independent review of employment practices in the modern economy, which was published in July 2017.

We responded to this review with the good work plan. The plan set out proposals to ensure workers know their rights and receive the benefits they are entitled to, and that action is taken against employers who breach those rights. Proposals include:

- First-day entitlements to holiday and sick pay;
- A new right to payslips for all workers, including casual and zero-hour workers; and
- A right for all workers to request a more stable contract, providing more financial security for those on flexible contracts.

As of 1 April 2019 the national minimum wage (NMW) was £7.70, and the national living wage (NLW) was £8.21. The annual earnings of a full-time minimum wage worker have increased by over £2,750 since the introduction of the NLW in April 2016. An estimated 1.8 million workers are expected to benefit from this above inflation increase. By 2020, almost 3 million low wage workers are expected to benefit directly from the NLW, with up to 6 million in total potentially seeing their pay rise as a result of a ripple effect up the earnings distribution.

The Parental Bereavement Act entitles parents who lose a child under the age of 18 to two weeks paid leave, supporting those affected by the tragedy of childhood mortality.

The Department consulted on a number of key employment issues. These include measures to boost workplace participation and to tackle employers misusing flexible working arrangements.

We announced a Tipping Bill, reaffirming our commitment to delivering employment rights reform to ensure our employment practices keep pace with modern ways of working.

Selling the grand challenges facing our society

Our industrial strategy is built to ensure we focus our efforts and resources on solving the grand challenges facing our society. Through this we will increase productivity and improve lives, as well as helping to make the UK a science superpower.

The “Industrial Strategy: building a Britain fit for the future” White Paper set out the Government’s long-term plan to boost the productivity and earning power of people throughout the UK, provide more opportunities for young people to find high-quality, high-skilled work, and spread jobs, prosperity and opportunity around the whole country.

We launched four grand challenges to put the UK at the forefront of the industries of the future:

- Growing the artificial intelligence (AI) and data driven economy
- Clean Growth
- Future of Mobility
- Ageing Society

We are pursuing five individual missions related to these grand challenges. Each of the missions focuses on a specific problem, bringing government, businesses and organisations across the country together to make a real difference to people’s lives.

We agreed 11 sector deals, partnerships between the Government and industry to create significant opportunities to maximise the potential of each sector. Each deal will substantially boost the sector’s productivity, through greater investment in innovation and skills.

The Space Industry Act created a regulatory framework for the expansion of commercial space activities and the development of the UK space port. It will enable the first commercial space launch from UK soil in history, creating the potential for hundreds of highly-skilled jobs and bringing in billions of pounds for the economy.

We launched the AI package for 200 UK doctoral studentships in AI and related disciplines which could help diagnose diseases like cancer earlier and make industries, including aviation and automotive, more sustainable.

The “Future of mobility: urban strategy” outlined the Government’s approach to maximising the benefits from transport innovation in cities and towns, therefore...
improving choice and the operation of the transport system. The strategy aims to make transport safer, more affordable and accessible to all.

We launched the West Midlands and Greater Manchester local industrial strategies, working with local leaders to boost the productivity and earning power of people throughout these regions. Local industrial strategies will allow places to make the most of their distinctive strengths, helping to inform local choices, prioritise local action and, where appropriate, help to inform decisions at the national level.

We announced funding for strategic priorities fund (SPF) wave 2 programmes on healthy ageing, clean air and productivity. These will help us to fulfil our goal of improving lives and increasing productivity through high-quality research and innovation. Programmes include research into care robots that could make caring responsibilities easier; digitising museum exhibits so they can be seen in peoples’ homes, libraries and schools; research into teenage mental health issues and closing the productivity gap with investment in super computers and a new productivity institute. The SPF Wave 2 total programme funding allocation is £496.8 million.

We set out plans to rewrite the regulation rulebook to ensure the UK leads the tech revolution and empowers consumers. The “Regulation for the Fourth Industrial Revolution White Paper” outlined how the Government will transform the UK’s regulatory system to free up businesses and innovators to test their ideas, make use of the latest technologies and get their products to market quicker, keeping the UK at the forefront of innovation.

We committed to increase investment to 2.4% of GDP by 2027. The Government are increasing spending on R and D by £7 billion over 5 years by 2021-22. This will be the largest increase in nearly 40 years. Within this funding we have:

Allocated £1.7 billion to the industrial strategy challenge fund (ISCF) over two waves of investment; £1 billion was announced for wave 1 in Budget 2017, and a further £725 million announced in the industrial strategy White Paper. These challenges have been developed to align with the four grand challenges set out in the White Paper. We have announced nine challenges under the third wave of the ISCF.

Announced investment of £118 million to attract highly skilled researchers to the UK through a new Ernest Rutherford Fund, providing fellowships for early-career and senior researchers.

Committed £900 million to the UK research partnership investment fund over 2012-2021, which will lever double from private sources into R and D collaborations between universities, business and charities.

Committed to developing the UK’s national space capabilities, including:

£1 million, matched by industry, for innovative new business ideas that could benefit from a flight to the international space station. These could be anything from new medicines and innovative materials developed in the low gravity environment, to space-flown consumer products.

£20 million is being invested to predict severe space weather events by improving systems at the met office space weather operations centre and building the UK’s knowledge on how to forecast and better prepare for space weather.

To support R and D we have also within this funding we have:

Published “Higher Education: Success as a Knowledge Economy” (White Paper, 2016). This document set out a range of reforms to the higher education and research system, aiming to boost competition and choice in higher education, and strengthen the way the sector is regulated, and research is funded.

Passed the Higher Education and Research Act 2017, bringing together the seven research councils, Innovate UK and research functions of HEFCE into a single, strategic agency called UK Research And Innovation (UKRI) to encourage collaborative research across the sciences, and closer co-operation between researchers, innovators and entrepreneurs. UKRI was formally launched in April 2018.

Getting businesses ready for Brexit and the opportunities beyond

Preparing for all scenarios and delivering a Brexit that works for business has been the Government and the Department’s immediate focus.

As part of the Government campaign to ensure people and businesses are ready for Brexit, the Secretary of State hosted nine business roundtables, including five regional events, and visited businesses across the UK, in locations including Belfast, Aberdeen, Cardiff and Manchester. Businesses participating in the roundtables included Tate and Lyle Sugars, JCB, Tesco, Unilever, Laing O’Rourke, Scottish Power and Diageo.

We ran a “Get Ready for Brexit” roadshow, with 30 events over six weeks across the UK, where 3,132 attendees received tailored advice and support on preparing for Brexit. We also produced an online version of the roadshow, which has attracted nearly 6,000 viewers.

The Department launched the business readiness fund to help business representative organisations (BROs) and trade associations to support businesses to be ready for EU Exit. Initially launched as a £10 million fund, a further £5 million has been made available due to the fund’s popularity. So far over £10 million in grants has been issued to support 124 BROs.

We published 28 of the Government’s 106 technical notices to help the public prepare for Brexit, including Horizon 2020, state aid, workplace rights, nuclear research, mergers and trading goods.

The Nuclear Safeguards Act made provisions for nuclear safeguards after the UK leaves Euratom, ensuring the UK meets its international commitments.

Euratom Exit Strategy

The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Nadhim Zahawi): The Government have further advanced their preparations for the UK’s withdrawal from Euratom and the European Union.

As made clear in previous statements on the topic, the UK has concluded all replacement international agreements required to ensure continuity for civil nuclear trade for when Euratom arrangements no longer apply to the UK and confirmed the operability of an existing bilateral nuclear co-operation agreement (NCA) with Japan.
Further to this, the UK and the Government of Japan held formal negotiations on the text of an amending protocol to the existing bilateral nuclear co-operation agreement (NCA) on 4 June. This amending protocol is not essential for the operability of the NCA or for our continued trade and co-operation with Japan but completes the formal legal process to amend the NCA on a permanent basis. Negotiations on the amending protocol continue.

Implementation guidelines for nuclear operators were published on 27 June outlining future reporting requirements on operators related to nuclear co-operation agreements. These requirements will allow the UK to comply with its NCAs with Australia, Canada, Japan and the US, following withdrawal from Euratom.

The UK also continued to make progress in implementing its new domestic safeguards regime. The Office for Nuclear Regulation (ONR) remains in a state of readiness to deliver a state system of accounting for and control of nuclear material (SSAC) that enables the UK to meet its international safeguards obligations when Euratom arrangements no longer apply.

The former Secretary of State prescribed the forms required by UK industry to notify UK regulators of the import of sealed radioactive sources from EU member states as well as the forms required by UK industry and UK regulators to apply for, authorise, and notify trans-frontier shipments of radioactive waste and spent fuel. The use of these forms will only be required from exit day in the event that the UK leaves the EU without a deal. A statement notifying Parliament of the use of the sub-delegated powers exercised to create these forms can be found in the report accompanying this statement.

Overall the Government have continued to work closely with industry to address the issues that may affect the civil nuclear sector in any exit scenario and remains committed to regular engagement with industry, civil society, academia, trade unions, and other interested stakeholders.

Today I will be depositing a report in the Libraries of both Houses that sets out further details on the overall progress on the Government’s implementation of its Euratom exit strategy, including domestic operational readiness, legislation and international agreements. The report covers the three-month reporting period from 26 March to 26 June 2019 and is the fourth and final statutory report under section 3(4) of the Nuclear Safeguards Act 2018.

To inform the review we launched a call for evidence in May 2018 and received more than 140 written responses. Meetings were held with 3,000 business leaders and we also engaged with sector trade bodies and membership organisations that jointly represent over 500,000 businesses across the UK, including Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland.

The business productivity review we are publishing today identifies best practice used by our leading businesses and sets out ten key actions that will support businesses to become more productive these include:

- £20 million to strengthen local England peer to peer networks in England focused on business improvement so that thousands of business leaders can share expertise on leadership, business development and technology adoption.
- £11 million to create a small business leadership programme in England to provide small business leaders with leadership training, building on existing world-class training programmes such as Be The Business’ productivity through people. Lancaster University’s LEAD and Goldman Sachs 10,000 small businesses programme.
- £25 million through the knowledge transfer partnerships to allow over 200 more UK based businesses per year to access the skills and talent to improve their business performance and productivity by improving how well they are managed.
- £30 million to support businesses to take action.

Today we are announcing that there will be a dedicated management KTP round which will be open on 12 December 2019 and closes on 19 February 2020.

Work with trade bodies, sector councils and Be The Business to ensure small businesses have access to business mentors from the UK’s leading and inspiring businesses.

Development of the evidence base on productivity, including through the recently announced productivity institute and the BEIS business support evaluation framework.

Work with the behavioural insights team to improve messaging to businesses, and work with trusted intermediaries—e.g. banks, accountants, trade bodies—to support small businesses to take action.

Improve the customer experience for businesses accessing online Government information and services for growth domestically and internationally.

Work with the private sector, such as Be The Business, to ensure businesses have access to clear advice and the tools they need to help them both understand and improve their productivity.

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): I am pleased to announce that I have today published the report “Changes and Choices”, co-authored by Professor Sir Adrian Smith and Professor Graeme Reid. This report, which I commissioned in March of this year, provides independent advice on the design of UK funding schemes for international collaboration, innovation and curiosity-driven blue-skies research. In the course of producing the report, Sir Adrian and Professor Reid issued a call for evidence and engaged in discussions with the research and innovation community across the UK. I would like to place on record my thanks to Sir Adrian and Professor Reid, as well as to all of those who engaged with them to ensure that the UK continues to be a global leader in science, research and innovation.

The UK’s world-leading science, research and innovation sector delivers real economic and social benefits for communities across the country. International collaboration...
allows us to work at greater scale than the UK could alone—for example to meaningfully tackle global challenges, such as climate change, artificial intelligence, cancer, and the future ageing society. In the Withdrawal Agreement Bill debate on 22 October, the Prime Minister confirmed that “we will protect, preserve and enhance” [Hansard, col.837] co-operation with European science and research funding programmes.

Sir Adrian and Professor Reid highlight the importance of stabilising and building on the UK capability built up through our international partnerships to date. This Government have participated in negotiations with European partners in a positive spirit as Horizon Europe takes shape—and intends to consider association to Horizon Europe provided the programme is open to third country association and offers value for money to the UK. Any decision about associating to the programme will need to take place after both the Horizon Europe proposal and the multiannual financial framework discussions have been completed in Council.

This Government are committed to ensuring that the UK continues to be a global science superpower. That is why we have committed to increasing R&D investment to at least 2.4% of GDP by 2027 and have announced our intention to significantly boost R&D funding to provide greater long-term certainty to the scientific community and accelerate our ambition to reach the 2.4% target. In this context, I welcome Sir Adrian and Professor Reid’s recommendation that the Government should set out a new vision for international collaboration. The report will help inform our ongoing ambition to deliver wide-ranging and effective research and innovation collaborations with partners around the world.

1 Adrian Smith Review: [Hansard HCWS1449]

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

British Indian Ocean Territory

The Minister for Europe and the Americas (Christopher Pincher): My noble Friend, the Minister of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon), has made the following written statement:

The United Kingdom is aware of the proceedings brought by Mauritius against the Maldives under the UN convention on the law of the sea (UNCLOS). The UK is not a party to these proceedings, which can have no effect for the UK or for maritime delimitation between the UK (in respect of the British Indian Ocean Territory) and the Republic of the Maldives.

The UK has no doubt as to our sovereignty over the British Indian Ocean Territory (BIOT), which has been under continuous British sovereignty since 1814. Mauritius has never held sovereignty over the BIOT and the UK does not recognise its claim.

As we have made clear previously, we were disappointed that the sovereignty dispute over the BIOT was referred to the International Court of Justice (ICJ). By agreeing to answer the questions put to it by the General Assembly on behalf of Mauritius, the Court has enabled Mauritius to circumvent the basic principle that the Court should not consider a bilateral dispute without the consent of both states concerned. This sets a precedent which will potentially have wide implications for other states with bilateral disputes.

Current financial services legislative proposals

The Finnish presidency will provide an update on current legislative proposals in the field of financial services.

European Central Bank—executive board member

The Council will be invited to adopt a recommendation to the European Council on the appointment of a new member of the executive board of the European Central Bank.

Digital taxation

The Council will be updated on the current state of play of digital taxation and will discuss the way forward.

European Fiscal Board report

The Council will be presented with the 2019 annual report of the European Fiscal Board.

EU statistical package

The Council will be invited to adopt Council conclusions on the EU statistical package and to review progress achieved.

Climate finance

The Council will be invited to adopt Council conclusions on climate finance for the COP25 climate summit.

Follow-up to international meetings

The presidency and Commission will inform the Council of the main outcomes of the G20 meeting of Finance Ministers and Central Bank Governors and the IMF and World Bank annual meetings held in October 2019.

Stable coins

As an AOB, the presidency will inform the Council about a joint statement on stable coins to be agreed at December ECOFIN.

[HCWS95]
Despite these clear reservations, the UK participated fully in the advisory proceedings in good faith. We have also made known our views on the content of the opinion, including its insufficient regard to some material facts and significant legal issues. These included the 2015 binding UNCLOS arbitral tribunal award, which held the 1965 agreement between Mauritius and the United Kingdom, in which Mauritius agreed to detachment of the BIOT in return for benefits including the United Kingdom commitment to cede the territory when no longer needed for defence purposes, was legally binding. The opinion also gave insufficient regard to the reaffirmation by Mauritius, after independence, of the 1965 agreement.

In any event, what is undisputed is that the opinion is advisory and not legally binding. Moreover, the Court itself recognised that its opinion is without prejudice to the sovereignty dispute over the BIOT between the UK and Mauritius.

As the dispute over the BIOT is a sovereignty dispute, the General Assembly is not the appropriate forum to resolve such disputes. General Assembly resolution 73/295, adopted following the ICJ’s advisory opinion, cannot and does not create any legal obligations for the member states. Nor can or does General Assembly resolution 73/295 create legal obligations for other international actors such as a special chamber of the international tribunal for the law of the sea. Neither the non-binding advisory opinion nor the non-binding General Assembly resolution alter the legal situation, that of a sovereignty dispute over the BIOT between the UK and Mauritius.

A fundamental principle of international law and the international legal order is the principle of consent. It follows that the special chamber is not in a position to pronounce itself on the sovereignty dispute between the UK and Mauritius without the consent of the UK to resolve the sovereignty dispute before the special chamber.

The UK remains committed to implementing the 2015 UNCLOS arbitral tribunal award and seeking direct, bilateral dialogue with Mauritius.

[HCWS890]

**Work of the Department**

The Secretary of State for Foreign and Commonwealth Affairs and First Secretary of State (Dominic Raab):

The Foreign and Commonwealth Office (FCO) uses its global platform to promote a truly global Britain and support the UK’s values and interests—from helping victims of forced marriage to championing media freedom to securing market access for British companies.

Its 270 diplomatic posts are invaluable assets in 169 countries and territories. Its leadership within nine multilateral organisations shapes global agendas and sets global standards. It supports 31 Government partners, including Department for International Development, Department for International Trade and the British Council.

It is also a diplomatic network with ambitions to expand influence. By the end of 2020, the UK’s diplomatic network will have opened 12 new diplomatic missions across the globe since 2018, recruited 1,000 more staff members and boast more sovereign missions than any other European country.

The Department has also provided extensive support to the Government’s efforts to prepare for Brexit. This has included contingency planning for a “no-deal” situation, engagement to influence the EU on negotiation priorities and an extension to article 50, providing support to UK nationals living in and travelling to the EU, and planning for the UK’s future partnership with the EU.

Since the strategic defence and security review in 2015, this Department has made significant achievements in the following priority areas.

**Protecting our people**

Safeguarding our national security by countering terrorism, extremism, weapons proliferation, and other state and non-state threats in co-operation with allies and partners. Assisting British people living, travelling and working around the world in times of need.

In 2018-19, the Department provided invaluable assistance to over 22,000 British people around the world, and ongoing support to 7,700 existing cases. We responded to 14 major incidents overseas, from terrorist attacks and natural disasters to high profile political and security issues.

This year, the Department partnered with the Civil Aviation Authority and the Department of Transport to carry out HM Government’s biggest peacetime repatriation operation of more than 150,000 people following the insolvency of Thomas Cook. In 2017, 85,000 passengers were returned to the UK after the collapse of Monarch.

The Department played a vital role in the response to Hurricanes Irma and Maria in 2017. The response involved 138 substantive updates made to travel advice for affected countries during the crisis, liaising with 14 foreign missions to answer queries on their nationals affected by the hurricanes, answering over 3,800 calls to the crisis hotline and deploying 82 FCO staff to provide support to 11 different countries in the region.

**Projecting our global influence**

Projecting and promoting the values and influence of a global Britain, strengthening our partnerships and the rules based international system. Supporting good governance, democracy, rule of law and human rights; preventing and resolving conflict; and building stability overseas.

In 2018, the Department helped to ensure a robust international response to the use of chemical weapons, following the attempted murder of a Russian dissident and his daughter in Salisbury using a chemical nerve agent. As a result, 28 countries and NATO expelled 130 Russian undeclared intelligence officers.

The UK is proud to have helped train almost 3,000 volunteers for the white helmets (a volunteer humanitarian organisation operating in Syria and Turkey) who have saved over 115,000 lives through their emergency rescue services in Syria. Through post in Geneva and in New York, the Department has worked to pressure the regime and its backers to end the fighting in north west Syria, and has supported efforts towards greater accountability for those who have attacked unarmed civilians, schools and hospitals. The Department has continued its strong deterrence messaging against the use of chemical weapons in Syria, including through support for the organisation for the prohibition of chemical weapons and the targeted and proportionate military response to the chemical weapons attack in Douma in April 2018.

UK climate change diplomacy led by the Department helped to achieve an historic international agreement to tackle climate change in Paris in December 2015. For the first time ever, 195 countries agreed to act together to combat global warming and reduce carbon emissions. In 2020, alongside Italy, the UK will host the United Nations framework convention on climate change conference of the parties, a clear signal of the UK’s global leadership on climate change and commitment to reducing greenhouse emissions to zero by 2050.

The UK has been a global leader in the international fight against the ivory trade, legislating to introduce the toughest ivory ban in Europe and help bring an end to the poaching of elephants. In 2018, the FCO-organised illegal wildlife trade conference was attended by 1,300 participants, and resulted in significant, ongoing pledges by several countries.
Promoting our prosperity

Promoting our prosperity by opening markets, driving economic reform, championing British business, and supporting free trade and sustainable global growth.

In calendar year 2018, the Department continued to play a unique role within the Government's cross-departmental conflict, stability and security fund (CSSF) and make a critical contribution to the CSSF’s work to tackle instability and prevent conflicts that threaten UK interests. The Department both delivered the majority of CSSF programmes and co-ordinated wider cross-Government efforts at the country and regional level, drawing on its deep foreign policy expertise. For example, in Ukraine FCO-led CSSF programmes have strengthened peacebuilding and resilience of conflict-affected communities, assisting more than 111,000 internally displaced peoples and supporting increased capacity in key Government ministries.

The Department has led on negotiations on Gibraltar, delivering an extensive set of agreements, as well as EU exit preparations on the other overseas territories. The Department has also supported the negotiation of arrangements for the sovereign base areas on Cyprus, and prepared for the implications of EU exit on UK sanctions policy.

In 2018-19, FCO-delivered prosperity fund programmes, worth a combined £850 million from now until 2023, began to deliver expertise and assistance in sectors and countries where there is high potential to support the inclusive economic growth needed to reduce poverty. Programmes initiated included a £45 million global anti-corruption programme, and £34 million ASEAN economic reform and low carbon programmes. The prosperity fund programme promotes economic reforms and remove barriers to trade, reform key sectors such as infrastructure, energy, financial services, future cities, education and healthcare, and tackle corruption.

In 2018, BAE Systems (BAES) won the tender to design and build nine future frigates for the Royal Australian Navy. It followed the Department playing an important role supporting the cross-Whitehall effort, and leading the campaign’s co-ordination in Australia. This outcome is a significant export boost for the UK as we prepare to leave the EU. It will secure around £2 billion of direct exports through British designed and manufactured components like engines (Rolls Royce) and Sonars (Thales UK and Ultra). It also opens doors to UK SMEs and secures approximately £10 billion worth of exports through the life of the programme. The whole of life sustainment win for BAES as a national shipbuilding enterprise partner is likely to generate another £40 billion.

In 2018, the Department hosted the largest ever Commonwealth Heads of Government meeting, with 46 Heads of Government and 49 Foreign Ministers. As chair-in-office, the Department has since been working to strengthen the Commonwealth with delivery of ambitious commitments on prosperity, security, fairness and sustainability with a focus on supporting small island states. Moreover, the Department has achieved Foreign Ministers’ agreement to reforms that will improve the governance of the Commonwealth secretariat.

Current affairs

HRVP Mogherini will raise Venezuela. She will reflect on two international meetings held in Brussels in October. First, the international contact group meeting held on 28 October. Secondly, the international solidarity conference on the Venezuelan refugee and migrant crisis which took place on 28-29 October.

HRVP Mogherini will brief Ministers on the follow-up to the October FAC and European Council conclusions on Turkey’s actions in north-east Syria and Turkish hydrocarbons exploration activity. We expect the Council to adopt a framework for a sanctions regime on the latter.

HRVP Mogherini will also provide an update on the conflict in Libya and preparations for the leader-level conference which Chancellor Merkel will host in Berlin later this year.

Afghanistan

Due to time constraints, the discussion on Afghanistan at the October FAC was postponed to November. Ahead of the publication of the recent presidential election results, Ministers will focus on the political situation in Afghanistan. They will review prospects for peace, in light of recent Afghan and US-led peace efforts. The UK will underline the importance of completing the electoral process in an impartial, efficient and transparent manner, and highlight the importance of momentum in the peace process.

Iran

Ministers will discuss the EU’s approach to Iran and Gulf regional security. Ministers will focus in particular on the importance of preserving the joint comprehensive plan of action (JCPoA) and the need for a diplomatic solution to de-escalate tensions in the region. Along with our French and German partners, the UK will highlight the importance of Iran returning to full compliance with its commitments under the JCPoA. All parties need to engage in comprehensive negotiations without prejudice to the JCPoA itself—to address Iran's nuclear activities after 2025 as well as regional security.

Ministerial lunch with Sudanese Prime Minister Hamdok

Ministers will discuss recent progress in Sudan with Prime Minister Hamdok. The UK will continue to urge the EU to be ambitious in the level of support they provide to Sudan throughout the political transition. This should be proportionate to needs and include assistance focused on economic and social stability, the peace process, human rights, and democracy and governance.

Council conclusions

The Council is expected to adopt a number of measures, including: a framework sanctions regime in response to Turkish hydrocarbon explorations around Cyprus; the annual review of the Venezuela sanctions regime; and authorisation to open negotiations with Somalia on the status of the EU’s training mission for the Somali security forces.
HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE

Learning Disability and Autism Training

The Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage): The Government have made improving the care and treatment of autistic people and people with learning disabilities a priority. Society is rightly judged on the way it treats its most vulnerable citizens.

Health and social care professionals have a crucial role to play in helping people with learning disabilities and autistic people lead longer, heather and happier lives. We know there is good practice out there and excellent examples of staff working incredibly hard and supporting individuals and their families to receive the best possible care. However, staff can often lack the training or experience to deliver effective and compassionate care, resulting in significant health inequalities for people with learning disabilities and autistic people and poorer health outcomes.

In February this year, my Department published a public consultation to obtain views on how best to ensure that staff working in health and social care receive the right training to understand the needs of people with learning disabilities and autistic people and develop the skills to provide the most effective care and support. The consultation ran for 10 weeks, closing on 26 April 2019.

I am pleased to say there was an excellent response to the consultation. We received over 5,000 responses from a range of key stakeholders as well as individual members of the public and I am grateful to those who took the time to respond to the consultation. I am also pleased to confirm that the overwhelming majority of responses were supportive of the principle of mandatory training.

Today, we are publishing the Government response to the consultation, confirming our intention to introduce mandatory learning disability and autism training. A copy of the response will be placed in the Libraries of both Houses.

Our vision is that in future all professionals will, before starting their career or through continuing professional development, undertake training which covers a “common core curriculum” for learning disability and autism so that we can be confident there is consistency across education and training curricula.

We are committing to work with all professional bodies and the devolved Administrations to agree a common core curriculum based on the core capability frameworks for supporting people with a learning disability and autistic people. We recognise that it will take time to ensure that all training is aligned with the frameworks; with periodic updates to syllabuses and training requirements, but we will work with the regulators to ensure the closest possible alignment at the earliest opportunity.

Like everybody across the House, I have been moved by the personal stories about how care and treatment has been experienced by people with learning disabilities and autistic people, which in some cases has resulted in the worst possible outcomes. Cases like that of Oliver McGowan, whose story captures why learning disability and autism training is so important. I can announce that we will be developing a high-quality training package that will be named in Oliver’s memory.

I am also pleased to confirm that we are committing £1.4 million to develop and run a series of trials across both the NHS and social care setting, so that we better understand the impacts before implementation and a wider roll out.

To make the training mandatory we are proposing a number of actions, recognising that different approaches are required for different staff groups. Further detail on this, and the proposals above, is set out in the consultation response.

We need to ensure that those who work in health and social care understand the needs of people with learning disabilities and autistic people, how their needs can differ from the general population and for staff to be able to respond to those needs appropriately and positively.

I believe the action we intend to take will do just that and ensure that everybody with autism or a learning disability receives the high-quality care they have a right to expect.

[HCWS91]

HOME DEPARTMENT

Immigration

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): I am announcing today the conversion of the prisons and probation ombudsman (PPO) investigation of Brook House immigration removal centre to a statutory inquiry, in accordance with the Inquiries Act 2005. This inquiry will investigate the mistreatment of detainees at Brook House immigration removal centre broadcast in the BBC Panorama programme “Undercover: Britain’s Immigration Secrets” on 4 September 2017.

The Government take any allegation of mistreatment, and the welfare of immigration detainees, very seriously, and I want to establish the facts of what took place at Brook House and ensure that lessons are learnt to prevent these shocking events happening again.

Sue McAllister, the prisons and probation ombudsman, had appointed Kate Eves to lead their special investigation into Brook House. Following conversion of the special investigation into an inquiry, Sue McAllister, as ombudsman, was automatically appointed as the chair. However, to ensure continuity with their investigation I have agreed that Sue McAllister will recuse herself and Kate Eves will take up the position of inquiry chair.

Kate Eves is an experienced and highly qualified investigator within custodial environments.

I have consulted with both Sue McAllister and with Kate Eves to confirm that the inquiry will have a similar scope to the PPO special investigation.

From today, the inquiry will have statutory powers to compel witnesses and establish the truth of what took place at Brook House.

I wish Kate Eves and all at the inquiry every success in taking forward this important piece of work.

The inquiry’s terms of reference are set out below:

Purpose

To investigate into and report on the decisions, actions and circumstances surrounding the mistreatment of detainees broadcast in the BBC Panorama programme “Undercover: Britain’s Immigration Secrets” on 4 September 2017.
To reach conclusions with regard to the treatment of detainees where there is credible evidence of mistreatment contrary to article 3 ECHR; and then make any such recommendations as may seem appropriate. In particular the inquiry will investigate:

- The treatment of complainants, including identifying whether there has been mistreatment and identifying responsibility for any mistreatment.
- Whether methods, policies, practices and management arrangements (both of the Home Office and its contractors) caused or contributed to any identified mistreatment.
- Whether any changes to these methods, policies, practices and management arrangements would help to prevent a recurrence of any identified mistreatment.
- Whether any clinical care issues caused or contributed to any identified mistreatment.
- Whether any changes to clinical care would help to prevent a recurrence of any identified mistreatment.

The adequacy of the complaints and monitoring mechanisms provided by Home Office immigration enforcement and external bodies (including, but not limited to, the centre’s independent monitoring board and statutory role of Her Majesty’s Inspectorate of Prisons) in respect of any identified mistreatment.

**Scope**

For the purpose of the inquiry, the term “complainants” is used to refer to any individual who was detained at Brook House immigration removal centre during the period 1 April 2017 to 31 August 2017 where there is credible evidence of mistreatment of that individual.

“Mistreatment” is used to refer to treatment that is contrary to article 3 ECHR.

The inquiry should in particular include investigation in to the mistreatment of complainants known (in the recent Brook House litigation) as MA and BB.

The inquiry may wish to draw upon the evidence and findings of the previous special investigation in to the events at Brook House, conducted by the PPO, before it was converted to a statutory inquiry.

**Method**

As a statutory inquiry, the inquiry will operate within the legal framework provided by the Inquiries Act 2005. As such, the procedure and conduct of the inquiry are to be directed by the chairman.

**Report**

The inquiry should be undertaken with sufficient pace to enable resulting recommendations to be implemented as quickly and effectively as possible. It is expected, on the basis of current information, that the inquiry will make its best endeavours to complete work and produce a final report to the Home Secretary, setting out its findings of fact and recommendations, within 12 months.

**Principles**

The inquiry will have full access to all the material it seeks.

The inquiry will bear the legal expenses for any individuals designated as core participant status by the inquiry chairperson.

It is not part of the inquiry’s function to determine civil or criminal liability of named individuals or organisations. This should not, however, inhibit the inquiry from reaching findings of fact relevant to its terms of reference.

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**Pre-charge Bail**

The Secretary of State for the Home Department (Priti Patel): This Government are fully committed to protecting the public, and ensuring the police have the powers they need. As such, today I am announcing that I intend to review pre-charge bail legislation to ensure we have a system which more effectively prioritises the safety of victims and witnesses and the management of suspects.

Pre-charge bail enables the police to release a suspect from custody, usually subject to conditions, while officers continue their investigation or await charging decision. The Policing and Crime Act 2017 “the Act” introduced reforms to pre-charge bail to address legitimate concerns that suspects were spending too long under restrictive conditions with no oversight or redress.

Specifically, the Act introduced (in relation to pre-charge bail): a presumption against use unless necessary and proportionate; clear timescales, and senior police and judicial oversight of its use and extension.

Since 2017 the use of pre-charge bail has decreased, and the number of individuals released without bail, or “released under investigation”, has also increased.

Furthermore, the demands on the police service have also changed. Concerns have been raised that pre-charge bail is not consistently being used in instances where it may be necessary to effectively manage suspects and protect victims and witnesses.

The review will also look at how legislative frameworks around pre-charge bail can more effectively:

- support the police in the timely management of investigations, whether released on bail or without bail (“released under investigation”);
- respect the rights of suspects, victims and witnesses to timely decisions and updates;
- support the timely progression of cases to courts; and
- how existing rules may be made simpler and more flexible in design to support effective operational decisions

**HOUSING, COMMUNITIES AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

**Work of the Department**

The Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government (Robert Jenrick): Boosting Home Ownership and Getting Britain Building.

*Getting more much-needed homes built*

Since 2010 we have delivered over 1.3 million homes.

In 2017, we published our ambitious housing White Paper, and set an ambition to increase the delivery of homes to 300,000 a year by the mid-2020s. In 2017-18 over 222,000 new homes were created, the highest number in all but one of the past 31 years.

There was a net increase of 232,800 in the number of domestic properties with a council tax band in England between March 2018 and March 2019.

We are also ensuring that people have access to high-quality, affordable homes, having delivered over 430,000 affordable homes since 2010.
In 2018, we launched a new national housing agency—Homes England—to increase the supply of new homes, bringing together money, expertise, planning and compulsory purchase powers.

We have invested in overcoming the barriers to building.

In 2017 we launched the £5 billion housing infrastructure fund, to provide infrastructure in areas where housing need is greatest. At Budget 2018 we increased the funding by another £500 million, taking it to £5.5 billion in total, which will potentially unlock up to 650,000 homes. Over £3 billion has now been allocated to housing infrastructure fund bids—all forward funding projects and 110 marginal viability fund projects—to unlock up to 297,100 homes, with more expected to be allocated over the coming months.

In 2018 we launched the £1.3 billion land assembly fund to acquire land needing work, making it less risky for developers to invest in. We also launched the £630 million small sites fund to help public landowners or local authorities speed up getting the right infrastructure in place to support stalled small sites.

In total, the Government have provided financial support for housing of at least £44 billion since the start of this spending review period to 2022-23. This includes £15 billion allocated at Autumn Budget 2017.

We have released land from the public estate for 109,000 homes through the 2011 to 2015 public land for housing programme, exceeding its 100,000 target. We have launched a successor programme, which aims to identify and release land for 160,000 new homes.

Boosting home ownership

In total, we have helped over 566,000 households into home ownership since 2010 through Government-backed schemes including help to buy and right to buy. The number of first-time buyers is at an 11-year annual high and has increased by 84% between 2010 and 2018.

Since its introduction in 2013, the help to buy scheme has helped over 221,000 households to get on the property ladder. In August 2019 we closed a loophole in the scheme, giving people the freedom to reduce their monthly mortgage repayments. This has opened up the help to buy re-mortgage market for more lenders, giving customers more choice and potentially paving the way to more competitive deals.

At the Autumn Budget 2017, we introduced stamp duty land tax relief for first-time buyers, which will help over 95% of first-time buyers who pay the tax, benefiting a total of 401,900 households so far and it is expected to benefit over 1 million households in the first five years. To date, this has saved first-time buyers an estimated £955 million.

We have launched two pilots of voluntary right to buy—one in 2016 and one in 2018—giving thousands of housing association tenants the opportunity to buy their homes.

In 2019, we announced plans for a new national model for shared ownership, which will help thousands of lower earners to step on to the housing ladder.

Improving people’s experience of the housing market

In 2010 we scrapped home information packs, removing unnecessary regulation and making the process of selling homes easier and less costly.

In August 2018 we published the social housing Green Paper, which set our ambitions for a new, fairer deal for social housing residents, including making it easier for residents to progress into home ownership. The Green Paper was informed by conversations with over 1,000 social housing residents and 7,000 online submissions.

Since 2012, the social housing waiting list has dropped by 40%. The Localism Act 2011 has given local authorities the power to set their own qualification criteria for social housing and to set policies which are appropriate to their local area.

We are helping renters by:

Passing legislation banning unfair letting fees and capping tenancy deposits, which will bring an end to costly upfront payments and renewal fees. The Tenant Fees Act came into force on 1 June 2019 and is set to save tenants £240 million in the first year alone.

Empowering tenants to tackle bad landlords through the Homes (Fitness for Human Habitation) Act 2018.

Ending the practice of evicting tenants with no clearly specified reason, by committing in April 2019 to repeal s.21 of the Housing Act 1988.

Cracking down on rogue landlords. Last year alone we introduced banning orders and a database of rogue landlords and agents, and we extended mandatory licensing to protect tenants from overcrowding and poor housing conditions in houses in multiple occupation.

We are helping leaseholders by:

Announcing a range of measures to cut out abusive practices within the leasehold market, including prohibiting the development of new build leasehold houses other than in exceptional circumstances and restricting ground rents in newly established leases of houses and flats to a peppercorn, zero financial value.

Reforming the planning system to ensure that the right homes are built in the right places

In 2012 we published the national planning policy framework, replacing over 1000 pages of individual policy statements. In 2018, we revised the national planning policy framework, implementing around 80 planning reforms whilst making it more streamlined and easier to use.

As of the end of September 2019, 301 of 338 local planning authorities (89%) have an adopted local plan. 152 of these local plans are up to date (45%). This compares to 58 (17%) local planning authorities that had an adopted local plan in May 2010.

We are now preparing an accelerated planning White Paper to speed up the planning system, including the potential for more fees to be refunded if councils take too long to decide on specific planning applications.

We have given communities more power to plan for their areas, by introducing neighbourhood planning in 2011. Since 2012 over 2,600 communities have started producing a neighbourhood plan.

We have introduced permitted development rights for change of use to residential; over 46,000 homes have been delivered in the three years to March 2018 through these.

In May 2019 we announced changes to permitted development rights, allowing thousands of homeowners to extend their properties quickly and easily without the need for a full planning application.
We have continued to protect the green belt and it is now larger than in 1997, when records began, if we disregard land re-classified as national park.

We have reformed the system of developer contributions, to support local authorities to better collect and spend contributions. Local authorities received £6 billion in developer contributions which go toward affordable housing and local infrastructure in 2016-17, a £2 billion increase in real terms than in 2011-12.

*Improving Quality and Design of Housing*

We recently launched our national design guide. The first-ever Government-backed national model design code will be published in the new year and will set out a clear model for promoting a better design and style of homes across the country, shaped by what local people want.

We launched the future homes standard consultation in October 2019, to ensure that every new home that’s built in this country from 2025 will have low or zero-carbon emissions and the highest levels of energy efficiency.

*Diversifying the housing market*

We are backing councils to build more homes by removing the housing revenue account borrowing cap in 2018, enabling them deliver around 10,000 homes a year by 2021-22.

We established the £4.5 billion home building fund in 2016 to get more homes built. This will provide £2.5 billion funding specifically for SMEs, custom builders and innovators, giving them the funding they need to compete in the market. The fund also provides £2 billion in long-term infrastructure funding to unlock between 160,000 and 200,000 homes by 2020-21, with an emphasis on developments on brownfield land.

We have supported the build to rent sector to deliver over 30,000 homes across the UK since 2012, with over 110,000 further such homes in the pipeline. The build to rent fund provided over £630 million of development finance for the supply of 6,000 new privately rented homes. The fund closed to new applications in 2015. The £3.5 billion private rented sector guarantee scheme finances new build rented properties, and as of October 2019, £1.75 billion in total has been approved for 9,050 homes.

In autumn 2017 we announced a further £8 billion in guarantees to support housebuilding, including purpose-built rented homes and SMEs: £4 billion has been allocated so far:

- In April 2019, we launched the £1 billion ENABLE build programme to support SME housebuilders.
- At spring Statement 2019, we announced £3 billion of guarantees to support affordable housing delivery. The invitation to tender to run the scheme opened in November 2019.

*Levelling up across the country*

We continue to decentralise power away from Whitehall and back into the hands of local councils, communities and individuals to act on local priorities. In the 2019 Queen’s Speech, we committed to publishing a devolution White Paper to unleash regional potential in England and enable decisions that affect local people to be made at a local level.

Eight metro mayors have been elected since 2017, most recently in North of Tyne in May 2019. Through a major programme of secondary legislation, we devolved significant new powers, including over transport, housing, skills and planning to the mayors and combined authorities. Mayors are growing local economies by working with local councils and businesses to create jobs, boost skills, build homes and improve connections.

We replaced top-down regional development agencies in 2012, following the establishment of local enterprise partnerships in 2011.

In 2014, we established the £12 billion local growth fund and have since funded three rounds of growth deals for local enterprise partnerships to support local areas, creating jobs, supporting businesses and encouraging growth.

We have agreed 26 bespoke city deals through two waves in 2012 and 2013. These deals devolved powers and opened up new and innovative ways of doing things to unlock growth and deliver jobs.

We have supported the creation of three mayoral development corporations at Old Oak, Stockport and Teesside, to drive regeneration and growth.

In March 2019, the Department announced two new housing communities in London, Old Oak Common and Brent Cross Cricklewood. The investment package totals £570 million and will create 20,000 new homes and new jobs opportunities in the area, whilst benefiting from new transport infrastructure.

*Supporting our towns, high streets and coastal communities*

In July 2019 the Prime Minister announced an expanded £3.6 billion towns fund. The Government have since announced an initial 100 places that Government have invited to enter into a town deal negotiation, and 100 places that are benefiting from the future high streets fund.

The Town Deal funding will enable communities to develop ambitious transformative plans, improving their economic growth prospects, transport, broadband connectivity, skills and culture. In October 2019, Government launched the #MyTown campaign to give a say in how a new generation of town deals should transform the place they call home.

The high streets funding will empower local leaders to help transform their high streets and town centres as consumer habits change. In August 2019, we announced its expansion, meaning that an additional 50 towns will now benefit from £1 billion of available funding. Part of the fund will be used to support the regeneration of heritage high streets. We have also funded successful initiatives such as “love your local market” and the “great British high street awards”, and established the high streets task force to give high streets and town centres expert advice to adapt and thrive.

In November 2018 we launched the open doors pilot scheme, which has matched landlords struggling to find tenants for their empty high street properties in five locations around England with community groups looking for space.

We are supporting our coastal communities through our coastal communities fund which supports projects in the UK delivering sustainable growth and jobs. In September 2019 we announced a further five towns which will benefit from this funding. Since 2012, we have awarded grants to 369 projects across the UK, totalling over £229 million.
Unleashing regional potential

Northern powerhouse

In 2016 we published the northern powerhouse strategy. Since then we have:
- Invested £3.4 billion of local growth funding in the region to support locally determined projects across the north.
- Seen record levels of investment in transport—over £13 billion between 2015-16 to 2022-21—and the creation of the first statutory, regional transport body outside of London, transport for the north.
- Created the northern powerhouse investment fund, worth £400 million, to support SMEs to grow and scale up.
- Boosted the international profile of the northern powerhouse through a commitment of £15 million to support trade missions and £7 million for the northern powerhouse taskforce.
- Improved education in the north, with £70 million for the northern powerhouse schools strategy.
- Seen almost 50% of the north being covered by devolution, with metro mayors in place across the north.
- In the autumn Budget 2018, the Government extended the transforming cities fund by another year, 2022-23, providing an extra £240 million available for six metro mayors for locally determined projects to improve transport connections. This builds on the initial transforming cities fund of £436 million in the northern powerhouse.

Midlands engine

In 2017 we published the first Midlands engine strategy which included an additional £392 million for Midlands local enterprise partnerships to support local growth projects, bringing the total growth deal funding for the Midlands to nearly £1.9 billion.

We have supported enhanced connectivity in the region with £25 million of funding for Midlands connect to publish its first strategy in March 2017. Further transport support has included, in March 2019, the transforming cities fund with Derby and Nottingham receiving £7.2 million, Leicestershire receiving £7.8 million and Stoke on Trent receiving £5.6 million.

We are investing over £250 million through the Midlands engine investment fund to support small businesses to start and grow.

Skills development is being supported in the region through a £20 million Midlands engine skills challenge, delivering targeted support to the unemployed through work coaches, providing English language training to help more people access employment and empowering employers to help employees with mental health issues.

Three institutes of technology have been established at Aston University, Dudley College of Technology and the University of Lincoln.

The west midlands was selected to become the home to the UK’s first multi-city 5G testbed in September 2018. The £50 million trial of new high-speed connectivity will pave the way for rollout across the UK. This builds on the already active 5G testbed in Worcestershire, putting the Midlands at the forefront of 5G developments.
The Homelessness Reduction Act came into force in 2018, which will transform the culture of homelessness service delivery. For the first time, it placed new duties on local housing authorities to take reasonable steps to try to prevent and relieve a person’s homelessness.

Since 2011 we have delivered 34,000 units of supported housing for disabled, vulnerable and older people.

Supporting Local Government to deliver high quality services with sustainable finances

Making public services better and more efficient

Between 2011 and 2016, we have provided almost £5 billion of council tax freeze grant funding to local authorities that froze their council tax level to help keep bills low.

We have worked with councils on agreeing locally led proposals to establish new unitary councils and to merge district councils, saving millions annually. In 2018-19 we supported two new unitary councils in Dorset and three merged district councils in East Suffolk, West Suffolk and Somerset West Taunton.

In 2011, we launched the troubled families programme to support local areas over the long term to transform the way services worked with families with multiple high-cost and complex problems. In 2015 we launched the second troubled families programme. As of March 2019, it has funded areas to work with nearly 380,000 eligible families, with 172,000 families achieving significant and sustained progress against the problems identified when entering the programme.

In 2013 we introduced new legislation to allow councils across England to charge double the rate of council tax on homes left empty for two years or more, and therefore raising funds which can be used to keep the overall rate of council tax down.

Council tax in England is 6% lower in real terms than it was in 2010. This follows a doubling of council tax over from 1997 to 2010.

We have also taken steps to ensure local authorities and private operators provide adequate parking spaces and are fair to their customers. These include:

- Amending the national planning policy framework and planning guidance to reduce restrictions on parking and help local authorities and householders rent out empty spaces in 2011;
- Reducing over-zealous parking enforcement through the Deregulation Act 2015, and giving local residents, community groups, and businesses the ability to challenge parking policies in the same year;
- Tackling rogue private parking operators through supporting Sir Greg Knight’s Private Members’ Bill, helping it to secure Royal Assent in March 2019; and
- Proposing a new code of practice, to be developed by the British standards institution, to provide drivers with a 10-minute grace period after their tickets expire and crack down on intimidating and aggressive debt collection practices.

Improving local government sustainability

The 2019 spending round provides access to the largest year-on-year increase in local authority spending power since 2010. We expect core spending power to rise by £2.9 billion, from £46.2 billion to £49.1 billion in 2020-21. This includes an additional £1.5 billion to help local authorities to meet rising demand for adult social care. Average spending power per dwelling for the 10% most deprived authorities is around 16% more than for the least deprived 10% in 2019-20.

The total net revenue service expenditure by all local authorities in England is budgeted to be £96.2 billion in 2019-20. This is 3.8% higher than the £92.6 billion budgeted for 2018-19.

We have helped to drive the integration of health and social care services following the establishment of the better care fund, from a total of £5.3 billion in 2015-16 to a total of £7.8 billion in 2018-19.

In 2013 we introduced the business rates retention system, giving local authorities more control over money they raise locally. We have conducted a series of pilots for full business rate retention.

Since Budget 2016 the Government have introduced a range of business rates measures in England worth more than £13 billion over the next five years.

Uniting the Country

Building communities and great places

We have empowered communities by establishing a range of community rights in the Localism Act 2011, including the community right to bid to help protect local assets for community use and the community right to challenge to give communities a greater role in shaping and running local services.

We are ensuring that communities are heard through our £3.2 million communities fund which has supported 54 local authorities to shape and improve service delivery in partnership with community groups. As well as investing a £1.85 million endowment, from March 2016 to March 2019, to allow communities to buy their local pub.

In September 2019 the community infrastructure levy regulations came into force, helping local people see how every pound of property developers’ cash levied on new buildings is spent.

In July 2019 we published a communities framework to set out our renewed vision for building stronger communities and championing communities in every aspect of society.

Green spaces and parks

In 2018-19 we invested £15 million to improve parks through the local authority parks improvement fund, the future parks accelerator and pocket parks plus. In October 2019 we launched a further £1.35 million of funding to extend the pocket parks programme. Pocket parks is designed to create new pocket parks or renovate existing parks that have fallen into disrepair where it can be shown that physical changes could have a significant positive impact on the local community and address a specific local need. Through the 2018 programme, we funded 198 new and renovated parks across England.

Integration

We are continuing to invest in isolated communities and improve English language skills by committing to spend over £50 million in 2018-19 and 201-20 to support priorities set out in the integrated communities Green Paper and subsequent action plan. At the spending round 2019, we announced an additional £10 million of funding to continue the integration areas programme with a major focus on English language provision, building on the success of the first five integration areas announced in 2018.
We are supporting English local authorities to tackle the impacts of recent migration through our £102 million controlling migration fund. Funded activity includes supporting newcomers to learn English and understand local social and cultural expectations, caring for unaccompanied asylum-seeking children and tackling rogue landlords.

Tackling hatred in all forms

We are committed to tackling all forms of hate crime as demonstrated through the hate crime action plan, this was refreshed in 2018. As part of the refresh, we have committed additional funding to continue to protect places of worship. We have committed over £1.5 million for projects to tackle racially and religiously motivated hatred.

We have committed to launching an anti-Muslim hatred working group and an antisemitism working group. Most recently, we have appointed an antisemitism advisor—Lord John Mann—and appointed the first advisor to take forward the Government's commitment to work on a definition of Islamophobia.

In September 2019, the communities secretary committed £100,000 funding to stem the spread of anti-Semitic material online. The Secretary of State also wrote to all councils and universities encouraging them to adopt the International Holocaust Remembrance Alliance (IHRA) working definition of anti-Semitism as a matter of urgency.

We are honouring and remembering Holocaust victims by committing up to £75 million for a striking new national memorial and a state-of-the-art learning centre next to Parliament, to be matched by at least £25 million from private donations. Subject to planning permission, construction will begin in 2020.

Achievements in Scotland, Wales and Northern Ireland;

The UK government has committed up to £1.6 billion for six city deals across Scotland and Wales and has committed to extending city deals to Northern Ireland. A funding commitment that has been matched by £1.4 billion from devolved Governments and a further £1.6 billion from other partners including local authorities, universities and the private sector.

The Secretary of State for Transport (Grant Shapps): I have today laid before Parliament a departmental minute describing a contingent liability raised as a result of a letter of comfort provided to Transport for the North.

Unfortunately, due to the need to secure value for money it is not possible to allow the required 14 days' notice prior to the liability going live. A delay until after the general election on 12 December or until January when Parliament returns following Christmas recess is likely to result in higher costs.

Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018: Section 4 Report

Northern Ireland (Executive Formation and Exercise of Functions) Act 2018, “the NIEF 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. It also requires me to 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 made clear that it could not be used to change the law on abortion or same-sex marriage in Northern Ireland. The guidance also provided 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.

Three reports required under section 4 have been published as written ministerial statements to date, on 30 January 2019, 1 May 2019 and 4 September 2019.

The Government will keep its position on the initial guidance published under section 4 of the NIEF Act under review, in the light of the legal duties under sections 8 and 9 NIEF Act, and work towards making the regulations which will come into force by 13 January 2020 for same-sex marriage and opposite sex civil partnerships and 31 March 2020 for abortion.
The letter of comfort provided by the Department is in respect of a lease for office accommodation for Transport for the North. The accommodation is to support TfN’s work on the Northern Powerhouse Rail Programme and involves a taking seven-year lease of which five years remain (with no break clauses). TfN is concerned that if it no longer requires the space, it will not be able to cover any remaining commitments related to the lease from its core funding. The cost of the lease is £183,000 per annum and the maximum exposure, taking account of committed funding to April 2021 is £505,000. TfN proposes to cover these costs from NPR development funding. This is currently confirmed to 2021/22. TfN will actively seek to sublet the space if it is not required for their operations.

The Treasury approved this liability. I have also informed the Chairs of the Transport Select Committee and the Public Accounts Committee.

[HCWS96]
Petition

Monday 28 October 2019

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Driving Test Centre in Dunfermline

The petition of Residents of Dunfermline and West Fife,

Declares that there is a clear demand for a Driving Test Centre to remain in Dunfermline.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges her Majesty’s Government to work with the DVSA to ensure a long-term arrangement is secured to retain the Driving Test Centre in Dunfermline with an adequate level of service provision to meet current and future demand.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Douglas Chapman, Official Report, 24 July 2019; Vol. 663, c. 1406.]

[Po02504]

Observations from The Minister of State, Department for Transport (George Freeman):

The Government want to keep people safe on Britain’s roads by helping everyone through a lifetime of safe driving.

The Driver and Vehicle Standards Agency (DVSA) is committed to providing driving tests in Dunfermline. It is doing everything it can to keep driving tests in the area.

The driving test centre at Estantia House, Dunfermline, closed on 31 May 2019 because the landlord ended DVSA’s tenancy agreement and refused to grant another lease.

DVSA is conducting driving tests from the Vine Conference Centre in Dunfermline. The agency is working with the Conference Centre to provide testing in Dunfermline for the longer term.
Petitions

Tuesday 29 October 2019

OBSERVATIONS

TRANSPORT

Rail link to Fleetwood

The petition of the residents of the United Kingdom.

Declares that there is a need in Fleetwood for decent transport links on the grounds of deprivation and poor economy.

The petitioners therefore request the House of Commons to urge the Government to reinstate the Poulton-le-Fylde to Fleetwood rail link.

And the petitioners remain, etc. —[Presented by Cat Smith, Official Report, 3 October 2019; Vol. 664, c. 1468.]

Observations from The Minister of State, Department for Transport (Chris Heaton-Harris):

The Government are working with local authorities and other partners to identify the best new rail projects that can unlock new housing and economic growth, ease overcrowding, meet future demand and offer good value for money. It is also helping them to identify new ways of designing, financing and funding additional rail capacity.

We welcome the news that Wyre, Fleetwood and Blackpool Council are jointly putting together a remit to examine the feasibility of reopening the Fleetwood to Poulton-le-Fylde rail link.

As indicated in the Government’s strategic vision for rail, any scheme seeking Government funding will need to demonstrate a strong business case. The Department for Transport will consider proposals on a case by case basis, based on the economic benefits put forward.

Our intention is for more enhancements to be promoted, funded and/or financed by a range of parties. We want to tap into the knowledge and expertise of promoters, investors and local partners and challenge them to identify what the right answer is for their transport needs and where schemes fit best with housing and other Government priorities.

We stand ready to consider a Strategic Outline Business Case for the re-opening of the Fleetwood to Poulton-le-Fylde rail line put forward by local authorities and other partners.

We have set up Transport for the North (TfN) to speak as a single voice for the North on the long-term strategic transport improvements the region needs. TfN recently published its Strategic Transport Plan (STP). It has a wide ranging and ambitious scope setting out connectivity priorities across the North that will help transform economic performance up to 2050. I am sure you will welcome, that enhanced public transport links to Fleetwood has been put forward by TfN as ‘a future potential intervention’ for delivery during the lifetime of the STP. We welcome TfN’s ongoing modelling work to review the phasing of the projects in their investment plan and look forward to taking into consideration the advice from our statutory partner TfN regarding the prioritisation of the Fleetwood to Poulton-le-Fylde scheme.

The Government remain committed to transparent policy making, and in accordance with our commitment to the Transport Select Committee, we have published a document which provide details on schemes currently in development.


This Departmental publication includes schemes which have entered the Rail Network Enhancement Pipeline, but not schemes which have received the decision to deliver (Network Rail’s Final Investment Decision)—details on these schemes can be found in Network Rail’s Enhancement Delivery Plan.

Road Safety outside Wingate Primary School

The petition of Community of Wingate Primary School.

Declares that safer roads for children are essential and that the roads outside Wingate Primary School should be made more safe.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to ensure that the roads outside Wingate Primary School are made safer for its pupils and other people in the community.

And the petitioners remain, etc. —[Presented by Phil Wilson, Official Report, 24 July 2019; Vol. 663, c. 1405.]

Observations from The Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Transport (Baroness Vere of Norbiton):

The Government are keenly aware of the impact of road traffic fatalities and injuries and the need to protect our most vulnerable, including children near schools, such as Wingate Primary School.

By internationally measured standards the UK has an excellent road safety record and a long history of success in encouraging safe behaviours from all those that use our roads. The number of people killed or injured on Britain’s roads has dropped by 31% from 2007 to 2017. In the same period there has also been a drop of 44% in the total number of children between 0 to 17 years old killed or injured on Britain’s roads. And in the area of County Durham, there has been a 37% drop in casualties of all ages and a 46% decrease in those aged 0-17 since 2007.

This Government are determined to make our roads even safer, which is why we are combining a range of focused measures to continue to improve road safety around schools.

Road Safety Statement

In July this year, the Department for Transport’s refreshed Road Safety Statement and two year action plan was published, which addresses road safety issues throughout the lifetime of roads users, from babies to the elderly. We will focus our work particularly on the
needs of four vulnerable road user groups, including young road users, rural road users, motorcyclists, and older road users.

We want to embed a deeper understanding of road danger in school age children and have awarded funding of £200,000 to Road Safety GB to undertake a research and evaluation programme which addresses the needs of children aged 4 to 11 years old. A portion of this funding is to roll out an augmented reality (AR) road safety resource in primary schools across the UK designed to develop children's road safety knowledge and skills.

**THINK! Education resources for 3 to 16 year olds**

We want to build road safety knowledge and skills among our younger generations, forming good habits that last a lifetime. The THINK! campaign provides free education resources online for 3 to 16 year olds. THINK! engaged parents, teachers, youth leaders and local road safety professionals in the development of these resources, which include films, songs and games to help children understand the importance of using the road safely. These resources can be accessed at: https://www.think.gov.uk/education-resources/.

**Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy (CWIS) Safety Review**

The Government are committed to increasing cycling and walking and making our roads safer for vulnerable users, including children. We will only achieve our long term ambition if children feel safe when they walk and cycle to and from school. Therefore, in November last year the Government's response to the Cycling and Walking Investment Strategy (CWIS) Safety Review Call for Evidence was published alongside an ambitious two year action plan, setting out 50 clear actions to tackle cycling, walking and horse riding safety.

**Bikeability**

Bikeability is the Government’s national cycle training programme designed to give people the skills and confidence to cycle safely and competently on local roads. It is underpinned by the National Standard for Cycle Training. Bikeability has funding of £50million to cover cycle training from 2016 to 2020.

Local authorities have bid to the Department for Transport for the training places they wish their schools to deliver across Levels 1-3 and Bikeability Plus. More than 2.6 million places have been delivered across the country since Bikeability started in 2007.

**Walk to school**

The Government have invested almost £3 million into the Walk to School programme, run by the charity Living Streets, since 2015 which aims to increase the number of children walking to school. Over 2017-18, 205 primary schools were involved in the programme with 14,254 more pupils and their parents walking to school. Walking to school rates increased across all 205 primary schools were involved in the programme, with 14,254 more pupils and their parents walking to school. Over 2017-18, 205 primary schools were involved in the programme with 14,254 more pupils and their parents walking to school. Walking to school rates increased across all

**Pavement parking**

We are aware that parking on the pavement can cause serious problems for child pedestrians; particularly for wheelchair users or those with visual impairments, as well as for parents with prams or pushchairs.

Within London there is a statutory ban on pavement parking. Outside London, local authorities have powers to prohibit pavement parking by making Traffic Regulation Orders (TROs) under the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984. They may also use bollards to physically protect pavements.

Earlier in the year we completed a wide-ranging evidence gathering exercise on pavement parking to help us understand the problem, the effectiveness of current legislation and possible options for change. Before deciding on the way forward, we want to consider our findings alongside the conclusions of the Transport Select Committee’s inquiry into pavement parking, published on the 9 September 2019.

**Parking around schools**

Under section 122 of the Road Traffic Regulation Act 1984, local authorities have a statutory responsibility to provide appropriate traffic management schemes for the roads they manage. They are free to make their own decisions about the streets under their care, provided they take account of the relevant legislation.

Local authorities can put in place “School Keep Clear” markings which are legally enforceable when used in conjunction with an upright road sign and a Traffic Regulation Order.

Local authorities with civil parking enforcement powers can enforce these restrictions by issuing Penalty Charge Notices (PCNs) to any vehicles found parked in contravention.

Although there are certain restrictions on the use of CCTV by local authorities for parking enforcement, the Department for Transport has ensured that CCTV can continue to be used to enforce parking outside schools in order to protect children.

**20 mph speed limits**

Local authorities are responsible for setting speed limits on local roads. They have the flexibility to set local speed limits that are appropriate for the individual road, reflecting local needs and taking account of local considerations. The Department for Transport issued guidance to local highway authorities on setting local speed limits in 2013.

Local authorities have powers to introduce 20 mph speed limits that apply only at certain times of day. This may be suitable where, for example, a school is located on a road that is not suitable for a full-time 20 mph zone or limit. These limits are indicated with variable message signs.

Alternatively, authorities can now introduce an advisory part-time 20mph limit using traffic signs with flashing school warning lights. These were prescribed in 2016 and can be a more cost-effective solution, where appropriate, and reduce sign clutter.

**Training**

Changes made to the practical driving test in December 2017 are encouraging candidates to obtain a broader range of driver experience prior to their test. The independent driving section, where the candidate must drive for 20 minutes without detailed guidance by the examiner, provides more relevant ‘real world’ situations for the assessment of a candidate’s ability to manage the vehicle, route and traffic simultaneously. This has opened up test routes so that they face more exposure to busier roundabouts and junctions to improve observation, and varying traffic situations to improve their judgement. Use of sat nav and the demonstration of controls on the move also help candidates to manage distractions.
DVSA also continues to develop the theory test, notably through use of Computer-Generated Imagery (CGI) in the Hazard Perception Test. Providing an opportunity to create high risk situations that the agency could not film safely, CGI has introduced a wider range of clips into the test featuring vulnerable road users or adverse weather conditions.

**Crossings**

Importantly, a new crossing, the parallel crossing, has been introduced to enable pedestrians and cyclists to cross where a signal-controlled crossing is not justified. Pedestrian countdown units can now be used to provide extra information on how long children have left to cross the road. To help local authorities use these measures, we are producing updated guidance. Chapter 6 of the Traffic Signs Manual will bring together and update existing out-of-date advice on designing traffic signals and crossings, as well as providing guidance on new measures. It will be published later this year.

**Summary**

In summary, this Government are taking an active role in tackling road safety around schools and will continue to support and engage fully in making all of our roads safer for everyone. All road users are required to comply with road traffic law in the interests of their own safety and that of other road users. For those who do not adopt a responsible attitude, or if their use of the roads creates an unsafe environment or causes nuisance, there are laws in place that can make them liable for prosecution.
The petition of Residents of the United Kingdom, Declares that the Prime Minister has spoken at great length recently about her legacy; further that if she leaves office before resolving the Windrush scandal and the many outstanding cases, then this will be her legacy; further that the Prime Minister should offer more than warm words and take action to solve the crisis she created; further that in 1948, individuals throughout the British Empire received citizenship under the British Nationality Act; further that these citizens, some from the Caribbean, came to the United Kingdom in order to help rebuild the country after the war; further that these citizens lived here, worked here and raised families here; further that the hostile environment policy accelerated during Mrs May’s time as Home Secretary led to many of these citizens losing their rights and in some cases being deported back to the Caribbean; further that others lost jobs, were forced into debt and suffer from immense stress and fear because of the policy; further that the former Home Secretary Amber Rudd said in April 2018 that it would only take two weeks to resolve the Windrush cases, however over a year has passed and there is still a significant number of outstanding cases; further that what has been done to these British citizens is outrageous, unfair and must end; further that a change.org petition initiated by Dawn Butler MP on this matter has received over 9,600 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Prime Minister Theresa May and the Government to resolve all outstanding Windrush cases by Wednesday 24th of July.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Dawn Butler, Official Report, 23 July 2019; Vol. 663, c. 1273.] [P002502]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Kennedy):

This Government have apologised for the harm suffered by the Windrush generation and have vowed to right the wrongs that had been done to them.

On 16 April 2018, the Home Office established the Windrush taskforce in order to give people the documents they need to demonstrate their status here. As part of this we gave an undertaking to complete applications within two weeks of receiving all the evidence being gathered. Usually this will be from the point that a person’s biometrics are taken, although in some cases further evidence is supplied by the applicant or other sources after this point. The Home Office has always acknowledged that some decisions will fall outside these timescales due to their complexity.

In May 2018, we launched the Windrush scheme, giving a free route, with reduced requirements, to British citizenship. While we have reduced the requirements for individuals, the Home Office does make additional checks on citizenship applications than for applications for confirmation of status and, as a result, we have not stipulated a timescale for these decisions. We continue to process applications as quickly as possible with careful consideration being made to each application.

We have now granted status, including citizenship to over 8,100 people but applications continue to be made under the scheme, and that is why there is continued work in progress. However, the scheme has also invited some claims that are without merit and a number fall for refusal. None of the refusal decisions have been made lightly, and all decisions have had lengthy and detailed consideration. The decision to refuse in these cases has been checked and challenged extensively.

Further to the Windrush taskforce and the Windrush scheme, the Home Office launched the Windrush compensation scheme on 3 April 2019 which followed the launch of an urgent and exceptional payment scheme on 17 December 2018.

On 26 September, the Home Secretary launched the Windrush advisory group, where community and faith leaders were brought together to advise on how the department can maximise the number of people applying to the Windrush compensation scheme. In September, we also launched the second phase of engagement and outreach to promote the compensation scheme and the wider work of the taskforce. Events are being held across the country, including in Lewisham, Liverpool, Sandwell, Leeds and Southwark.

The Home Office is also attending some events in partnership with, and arranged by external partners. Full details are available at: https://www.gov.uk/government/news/windrush-compensation-scheme-and-taskforce-community-events.
Petitions

Monday 4 November 2019

PRESENTED PETITION

Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

India in the Jammu and Kashmir Region

The petition of residents of Burnley,
Declares that the attached petition calls on the actions of India in the occupied region of Jammu and Kashmir should be resolved to a peaceful conclusion that is acceptable to the residents of Kashmir; notes that the Indian decision to revoke Article 370 and 35A of the Indian Constitution has caused killings and human rights violations in Indian occupied Kashmir; further that the communications blackout in Indian occupied Kashmir has been distressing for residents with families in the region and has stifled journalism on the issue; and further that concerned residents of Burnley many of whom have family in the area have self-organised to create a petition that has received over 1046 signatures to call for action on the issue.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to compel the Foreign Secretary to call for an end to the communications lock down, lifting the curfew and the compliance of all past United Nations resolutions relating to Kashmir by the State of India.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Julie Cooper.]

[002544]

OBSERVATIONS

FOREIGN AND COMMONWEALTH OFFICE

Dispute in Kashmir

The petition of Residents of the City of Glasgow,
Declares that the dispute in Kashmir should be resolved peacefully.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the UK Government to use its international standing to encourage India to engage in a comprehensive and sustained dialogue process with its neighbour Pakistan to resolve the Kashmir dispute, and urge the international community to play its role in securing a just and peaceful resolution of the Kashmir dispute in accordance with the aspirations of the people of Jammu and Kashmir.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Alison Thewliss, Official Report, 4 September 2019; Vol. 664, c. 317.]

[002512]

Another petition in the same terms was presented by the hon. Member for Glasgow Central (Alison Thewliss) [P002524].

Petitions in the same terms were also presented by the hon. Member for Airdrie and Shotts (Neil Grey) [P002516] and the hon. Member for Stretford and Urmston (Kate Green) [P002529].

Observations from the Minister of State, Foreign and Commonwealth Office (Lord Ahmad of Wimbledon):

The long-standing position of the UK is that it is for India and Pakistan to find a lasting political resolution on Kashmir, taking into account the wishes of the Kashmiri people; it is not for the UK to prescribe a solution or act as a mediator. We have spoken with the Governments of India and Pakistan on a number of occasions since 5 August.

The Prime Minister has underlined the importance of resolving issues through dialogue to both Prime Minister Modi of India and Prime Minister Khan of Pakistan. The Foreign Secretary has spoken with the Indian Minister of External Affairs to express the UK’s concerns around the situation in India-administered Kashmir and call for calm. Lord Ahmad, the Minister for South Asia, has also spoken on a number of occasions with both the Indian High Commissioner, Ruchi Ghanashyam and the Pakistani High Commissioner, Mohammad Nafees Zakaria about the situation, as well as to Minister Mukhtar Abbas Naqvi, Minister for Minority Affairs, during his recent visit to New Delhi.

We encourage both India and Pakistan to maintain good relations, but recognise that the pace of progress is for both sides to determine.

HOME DEPARTMENT

Lizanne Zietsman, Isle of Arran

The petition of residents of North Ayrshire and Arran,
Declares that we are deeply concerned by the UK Home Office’s decision to refuse Lizanne Zietsman leave to remain in the UK; further that Lizanne has settled on the Island of Arran with her Scottish-born husband and has built a successful business employing local residents; further that she is a valued and respected member of the Arran community which is bewildered and dismayed that the UK Home Office has rejected her application to stay in the UK; and further that an online petition on this matter has received over 16,069 signatures.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Home Office to grant Lizanne leave to remain in the UK so that she can continue to contribute to the Isle of Arran community.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Patricia Gibson, Official Report, 9 July 2019; Vol. 663, c. 284.]

[002488]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Kennedy):

The Government does not routinely comment on individual cases.

Reclassification of Ministers of Religion under Immigration Rules

The petition of the residents of Glasgow North East,
Declares that visiting clergy offer respite to dedicated Ministers and bring enormous cultural benefit to the communities they serve; and further that the introduction of severe conditions regarding English language proficiency
and the sharp rise in fees for visas for Ministers of Religion would cause detriment to the communities they wish to serve.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Minister for Immigration, the hon. Member for South Ribble, to revoke the decision to reclassify visiting Ministers of Religion as being Tier 2 visitors under immigration rules.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Mr Paul Sweeney, Official Report, 7 October 2019; Vol. 664, c. 1599.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for the Home Department (Seema Kennedy):

The Government recognise the role of faith in our communities, helping to build social cohesion and support our congregations in the UK. The Government recognise too, the value of the contributions, made by members of religious institutions from overseas, which is reflected in dedicated visa arrangements.

The immigration rules for visitors include specific provisions for Ministers of Religion, coming to the UK to undertake pastoral duties. This can include one-off engagements such as conducting ceremonies or leading a service, provided they are not receiving payment.

Beyond this, Tier 2 (Minister of Religion) and Tier 5 (Temporary Worker) offer routes for religious workers who wish to fill positions in the UK, for longer periods. Ministers of Religion play leading roles in our communities and Tier 2 allows them to do so, for up to three years, with the option to stay longer. It is important to ensure that anyone taking up such a role can communicate with both their congregation and the wider community in which they live and serve, which is why Tier 2 visa holders are required to demonstrate a strong command of English.

Tier 5 (Temporary Worker) offers a dedicated subcategory for religious workers undertaking non-pastoral, supporting roles, for a maximum of two years. As a package of routes, designed to facilitate cultural exchange and knowledge sharing, Tier 5 visa categories do not require English language proficiency.

The changes made to the immigration rules in January 2019 better defined what activities may be undertaken by Tier 5 temporary religious workers, and ensure that those filling positions as Ministers of Religion, may continue to do so, via the correct visa category.

The issue of fees has been raised and the Government acknowledge the extra cost of a Tier 2 visa. However, the Government’s policy remains that those who use and benefit most from the immigration system should contribute towards its operation. Tier 2 incurs the greater costs, but, in return it offers the most favourable conditions, whereas, a visit visa for a Minister of Religion carrying out permitted activities for less than six months, attracts the lowest cost of all.

The Government continue to believe that existing visa arrangements for Ministers of Religion and religious workers, strikes the right balance between serving the needs of all congregations and the Government’s wider position on integrated communities.
Petitions
Tuesday 5 November 2019

PRESENTED PETITION
Petition presented to the House but not read on the Floor

Hillcrest Care Home
The petition of residents of Erewash,
Declarations that the planning application to convert the former Hillcrest Care Home into a house of multiple occupancy should be rejected by Erewash Borough Council, and notes the negative impact that this change of use would have on the residents of Kirk Hallam should these plans be approved.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons directs the Secretary of State for Housing, Communities and Local Government to urge Erewash Borough Council to reject the Hillcrest planning application and call on the developers to find an alternative, more suitable use for the site, thus reducing the impact on the residents of Kirk Hallam.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Maggie Throup.]

Tamworth George Bryan Centre
The petition of Kath Jones and Gwen Kingsley.
Declarations that we, the undersigned, are opposed to any proposal to close the George Bryan Centre, following the fire at the George Bryan Centre on 10 February 2019; further that the centre provides vital mental health services and is used by the local community of Tamworth and its environs.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to help rebuild and reopen the George Bryan Centre and to continue to provide vital mental health services to the community as supported by 5179 Tamworth residents.

And the petitioners remain, etc. / [P002546]

OBSERVATIONS

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Morrison’s supermarket Shirley
The petition of residents of Solihull,
Declarations that local residents have great concern over the proposals to close Morrison’s Store, in Shirley.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to encourage WM Morrisons PLC to reconsider proposals to close Morrisons in Shirley.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Julian Knight, Official Report, 26 September 2019; Vol. 664, c. 972.]

Observations from the Parliamentary Under-Secretary of State for Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy (Kelly Tolhurst):
The Government recognise the vital contribution that retailers make not only to the UK economy but also to local communities. We also recognise local residents’ concerns at the impact of the closure of the Shirley Morrisons store.

That said, it would not be right for Government to interfere in the management decisions of a private company such as WM Morrisons, as it takes decisions on commercial matters affecting its business.

The Government have been in touch with Morrisons and understand that Morrisons have taken the decision to close the Shirley store as part of a restructuring programme. We recognise this is not the news the petitioners wished to hear.

Morrisons have spoken to the teams in affected stores and are now working with them to review the options available to them including redeployment within the business. The most important thing is that Morrisons continue to provide the necessary level of employee support to ensure staff are redeployed or moved back into employment as soon as possible.

In a wider context the Greater Birmingham and Solihull LEP (GBSLEP) have been awarded £433 million across three growth deals to invest in projects that benefit the local area and economy. To date the LEP have supported a number of projects in Solihull, which includes over £2 million investment into improved transport infrastructure at Lode Lane and over £1.9 million in upgrading and improving the skills provision at Solihull College and University Centre.

In March this year, GBSLEP launched a new Framework to regenerate town centres and high streets across the region. The document offers guidance on how towns can attract more investment by drawing on best practice from other locations. Solihull Council was involved in the development of this strategy and continues to work closely with the LEP to maximise the economic opportunity of the areas towns and high streets.

HEALTH AND SOCIAL CARE
University Hospital Monklands
The petition of residents of Coatbridge, Chryston and Bellshill,

Declarations that the Scottish Government Cabinet Secretary for Health and Sport Jeane Freeman’s unilateral executive decision to remove the current site of University Hospital Monklands as an option for the location of the new University Hospital Monklands will detrimentally impact healthcare provision across Lanarkshire; further that the current site offers significant advantages for a new hospital such as its existing public transport infrastructure; further that the unilateral executive decision taken by the Cabinet Secretary is in defiance of the recommendation of the Monklands Hospital Independent Review for greater public consultation on the location of the new University Hospital Monklands; further that concerns have failed to be addressed regarding the two alternative location options for the new hospital, particularly whether the offer of land in Glenmavis can be withdrawn at the whim of the owner; further that the Scottish Government should rebuild the planned new University Hospital.
Monklands on the site of the current hospital as it is the most suitable option for the greatest number of people in the Monklands community and is essential to those it serves.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges the Government to make representations to the Scottish Government on their behalf to have the current hospital site reinstated as an option for the location of the new University Hospital Monklands.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Hugh Gaffney, Official Report, 16 October 2019; Vol. 666, c. 420. /]

Observations from the Minister for Care (Caroline Dinenage):

Health and Social Care is largely devolved across the United Kingdom. As such, it is for the Scottish Government to set their own priorities for its health service and to make decisions regarding the operations of the healthcare system across Scotland.

TREASURY

Dispute between HMRC and Roadchef Employees Benefit Trust

The petition of residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares that concerns about the Roadchef Employees Benefit Trust have escalated to an unreasonable level; notes that despite a meeting taking place on the 27th of March 2019 between HMRC and REBTL, eligible employees that include local residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk have still to receive any payments as HMRC is continuing to hold the funds over the level of tax liability of the beneficiaries; and further notes it is unacceptable that the distribution of funds is being prevented by HMRC notwithstanding a High Court ruling in January 2014 in favour of the Roadchef Employees Benefits Trustees Ltd.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urges HMRC to end their foot-dragging and resolve this long-standing issue of the withholding of payments by HMRC to the Roadchef Employees Benefit Trust.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Martyn Day, Official Report, 16 October 2019; Vol. 666, c. 419. /]

Observations from the Economic Secretary to the Treasury (John Glen):

The Government thanks the ho. Member for Linlithgow and East Falkirk (Martyn Day), who has recently submitted a petition regarding the independent investigation into the failure of the firm London Capital and Finance (LCF).

The Government want to make sure we have a strong and safe financial system and recognises that this is a very difficult and uncertain time for all LCF bondholders. That is why on 23 May, the Economic Secretary to the Treasury formally directed the Financial Conduct Authority (FCA) to launch an independent investigation into the events at LCF, and approved the FCA’s appointment of Dame Elizabeth Gloster to lead it.

Dame Elizabeth is looking at the events and circumstances surrounding the failure of LCF and whether, in its supervision of LCF, the FCA discharged its functions in a manner which enabled it to effectively fulfil its statutory objectives. Dame Elizabeth is able to consider any other matters she deems relevant to the events set out in the Economic Secretary to the Treasury’s direction to the FCA.

The Government’s view is that the investigation should take place without delay. The Government have directed the FCA to report the findings of the investigation back to the Treasury once the investigation has concluded, as well as the lessons it will take from those findings. The Treasury has stipulated that the investigation should be completed within 12 months. This will ensure that the investigation is as thorough as possible, whilst allowing the investigator to report sooner than 12 months if this is feasible. The investigation will be completed by 9 July 2020.

The petition has also raised the issue of compensation for investors. The administrators are currently estimating recoveries for investors. The Financial Services Compensation Scheme (FSCS) can only provide compensation for claims connected with certain types of regulated activities.

Insolvency of London Capital and Finance

The petition of residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk,

Declares that investors affected by the insolvency of London Capital and Finance eight months ago have still to learn whether they will have access to the Financial Services Compensation Scheme; notes investors that include local residents of Linlithgow and East Falkirk have still to receive clarification about the Financial Conduct Authority’s role in regulation the activity of London Finance and Capital; and further notes no explanation has been given as to why London Finance and Capital was permitted to promote itself as regulated by the Financial Conduct Authority.

The petitioners therefore request that the House of Commons urge the Treasury to ensure that the independent investigation into the events around London Capital and Finance’s collapse is not in any way impeded and reaches a swift conclusion.

And the petitioners remain, etc.—[Presented by Martyn Day, Official Report, 16 October 2019; Vol. 666, c. 419. /]
The FSCS is an independent body. The FSCS carries out its compensation function within rules set by the Prudential Regulation Authority (PRA) and the FCA, which are also independent from Government. As such, the Government is therefore unable to intervene or comment on specific cases and decisions taken by the FSCS.

The FSCS has been working closely with LCF’s administrators and the FCA to understand more about LCF’s activities. At this stage, the FSCS’s investigation has led it to believe that there are protected claims, which may result in compensation for some of LCF’s investors.

The FSCS is continuing its investigation and has launched a questionnaire for investors to complete, to better understand individual investor’s circumstances and the number of investors that may have been impacted. It has also invited LCF investors to register for updates on its website. The questionnaire, registration for updates, and further information can be found at https://www.fscs.org.uk/failed-firms/lcf/.
Ministerial Correction

Wednesday 30 October 2019

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Common Organisation of the Markets in Agricultural Products (Producer Organisations and Wine) (Amendment etc) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019

The following is an extract from the Second Delegated Legislation Committee on 28 October 2019:

George Eustice: There was discussion with the devolved Administrations earlier this year on exactly which matters were reserved and which devolved. These are the matters we have decided and agreed are reserved, which is why we made this instrument.

[Official Report, Second Delegated Legislation Committee, 28 October 2019, c. 6-7.]

Letter of correction from the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice):

An error has been identified in my closing remarks.

The correct wording should have been:

George Eustice: There was discussion with the devolved Administrations earlier this year on exactly which matters were reserved and which devolved. These are the matters we have decided are reserved, which is why we made this instrument.
Ministerial Corrections

Thursday 31 October 2019

BUSINESS, ENERGY AND INDUSTRIAL STRATEGY

Topical Questions
The following is an extract from Business, Energy and Industrial Strategy Topical Questions on 22 October 2019.

T10. [900069] Douglas Ross (Moray) (Con): I recently visited Orbex in Forres, which is heavily involved in the new spaceport at Sutherland and is seen as a sector leader with its new innovative launch vehicle. Will the Minister outline what support the UK Government can give to companies such as Orbex, which plans to bring 250 high-quality jobs to the region?

The Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation (Chris Skidmore): The Government support growing our national space capabilities, especially by establishing the new national space council, which will be chaired by the Prime Minister. We are supporting Orbex to develop an exciting new launch vehicle technology with a grant of £5.5 million as part of our industrial strategy. We are keen to work with it as part of the wider national space framework we are establishing.


Letter of correction from the Minister for Universities, Science, Research and Innovation, the right hon. Member for Kingswood (Chris Skidmore): An error has been identified in the response I gave to my hon. Friend the Member for Moray (Douglas Ross).

The correct response should have been:

Chris Skidmore: The Government support growing our national space capabilities, especially by establishing the Cabinet-level National Space Council. We are supporting Orbex to develop an exciting new launch vehicle technology with a grant of £5.5 million as part of our industrial strategy. We are keen to work with it as part of the wider national space framework we are establishing.

INTERNATIONAL TRADE

EU Trade Agreements: Roll-over
The following is an extract from questions to the Secretary of State for International Trade on 17 October 2019.

2. Dr Rupa Huq (Ealing Central and Acton) (Lab): What progress she has made on the rollover of existing EU trade agreements.

The Minister of State, Department for International Trade (Conor Burns): In preparation for our exit from the European Union, the Government have, to date, secured 16 continuity trade agreements with 46 countries. Trade with those countries represents 72% of the UK’s total trade. I am pleased to inform the House that only last week my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State signed another agreement with the Southern African Customs Union and Mozambique to roll over the existing EU trade agreements that we have with them.


Letter of correction from the Minister of State, Department for International Trade, the right hon. Member for Bournemouth West (Conor Burns):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Ealing Central and Acton (Dr Huq).

The correct response should have been:

The Minister of State, Department for International Trade (Conor Burns): In preparation for our exit from the European Union, the Government have, to date, secured 16 continuity trade agreements with 46 countries. Trade with those countries represents 72% of the UK’s total trade with those with which we are seeking continuity. I am pleased to inform the House that only last week my right hon. Friend the Secretary of State signed another agreement with the Southern African Customs Union and Mozambique to roll over the existing EU trade agreements that we have with them.
Ministerial Correction

Monday 4 November 2019

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS

Draft Common Organisation of the Markets in Agricultural Products and Common Agricultural Policy (Miscellaneous Amendments etc.) (EU Exit) (No. 2) Regulations 2019

The following is an extract from the debate on the draft Common Organisation of the Markets in Agricultural Products and Common Agricultural Policy (Miscellaneous Amendments etc.) (EU Exit) (No. 2) Regulations 2019 on 7 October 2019.

George Eustice: We have consulted extensively with the devolved Administrations on the instrument to ensure that the legislation that it amends continues to work while, obviously, respecting the devolution agreements. Most areas covered by the instrument are devolved, with powers transferring to the devolved Ministers. In many cases, the Secretary of State can act on behalf of the devolved Administrations should they give their consent. In one or two areas relating to enforcement, Wales has chosen to introduce its own statutory instruments, for example in relation to the administration of an apiculture—beekeeping—scheme and some of the design elements of a school milk scheme.

Letter of correction from the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice):

Errors have been identified in my opening speech. The correct remarks should have been:

George Eustice: We have consulted extensively with the devolved Administrations on the instrument to ensure that the legislation that it amends continues to work while, obviously, respecting the devolution agreements. Most areas covered by the instrument are devolved, with powers transferring to the devolved Ministers. In many cases, the Secretary of State can act on behalf of the devolved Administrations should they give their consent. In one or two areas, Wales has chosen not to have such a mechanism in the legislation, for example in relation to the administration of an apiculture—beekeeping—scheme and legislative powers concerning some of the design elements of a school milk scheme.
Ministerial Corrections

Tuesday 5 November 2019

ENVIRONMENT, FOOD AND RURAL AFFAIRS
Draft Agriculture (Miscellaneous Amendments) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019

The following is an extract from the debate on the draft Agriculture (Miscellaneous Amendments) (EU Exit) Regulations 2019 on 21 October 2019.

George Eustice: We allow eggs to be imported only if they meet our marketing standard, which is currently an EU marketing standard. If in future a third country were to meet that standard, which is set out separately in law, there would need to be a body that attests to the fact. That is a power that the Secretary of State must have in future, as the EU will no longer be able to do that for us.

[Official Report, Second Delegated Legislation Committee, 21 October 2019, c. 10.]

Letter of correction from the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice):

Errors have been identified in my response to the debate.

The correct remarks should have been:

George Eustice: We allow eggs that do not meet standards equivalent to EU marketing standards to be imported only if their packs are marked accordingly. If in future a third country were to meet a standard equivalent to the UK standard, which is set out separately in law, there would need to be an authority that attests to the fact. That is a power that the Secretary of State must have in future, as the EU will no longer be able to do that for us.

[Official Report, Second Delegated Legislation Committee, 21 October 2019, c. 10.]

Letter of correction from the Under-Secretary of State for Health and Social Care, the hon. Member for Mid Bedfordshire (Ms Dorries):

An error has been identified in the response I gave to the hon. Member for Dewsbury (Paula Sherriff).

The correct response should have been:

Ms Dorries: Obviously I cannot comment on an individual case, but what I can say is that the NICE guidelines on assessment for suicide were recently sent out to A&E departments to ensure that people who present with mental health problems are treated holistically and looked at in the round to assess whether they are a suicide risk.

We are investing £2.3 billion in mental health services—more than invested by any previous Government—and a huge amount of that is going towards children and young people. I hope cases such as the one highlighted by the hon. Lady will be a thing of the past. We have turned a corner. We are rolling out these mental health teams and, in the last year alone, 3,000 more people are working with young people and young adults. We have the new training scheme and the school mental health support teams. There is more to be done, but I hope such stories will become a thing of the past.


Letter of correction from the Minister of State, Department for Environment, Food and Rural Affairs, the hon. Member for Camborne and Redruth (George Eustice):

Errors have been identified in my response to the debate.

The correct remarks should have been:

George Eustice: We allow eggs to be imported only if they meet our marketing standard, which is currently an EU marketing standard. If in future a third country were to meet that standard, which is set out separately in law, there would need to be a body that attests to the fact. That is a power that the Secretary of State must have in future, as the EU will no longer be able to do that for us.

[Official Report, Second Delegated Legislation Committee, 21 October 2019, c. 10.]

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The correct response should have been:

Ms Dorries: Obviously I cannot comment on an individual case, but what I can say is that the NICE guidelines on assessment for suicide were recently sent out to A&E departments to ensure that people who present with mental health problems are treated holistically and looked at in the round to assess whether they are a suicide risk.

We are investing £2.3 billion in mental health services—more than invested by any previous Government—and a huge amount of that is going towards children and young people. I hope cases such as the one highlighted by the hon. Lady will be a thing of the past. We have turned a corner. We are rolling out these mental health teams and, in the last year alone, 2,300 more people are working with young people and young adults. We have the new training scheme and the school mental health support teams. There is more to be done, but I hope such stories will become a thing of the past.